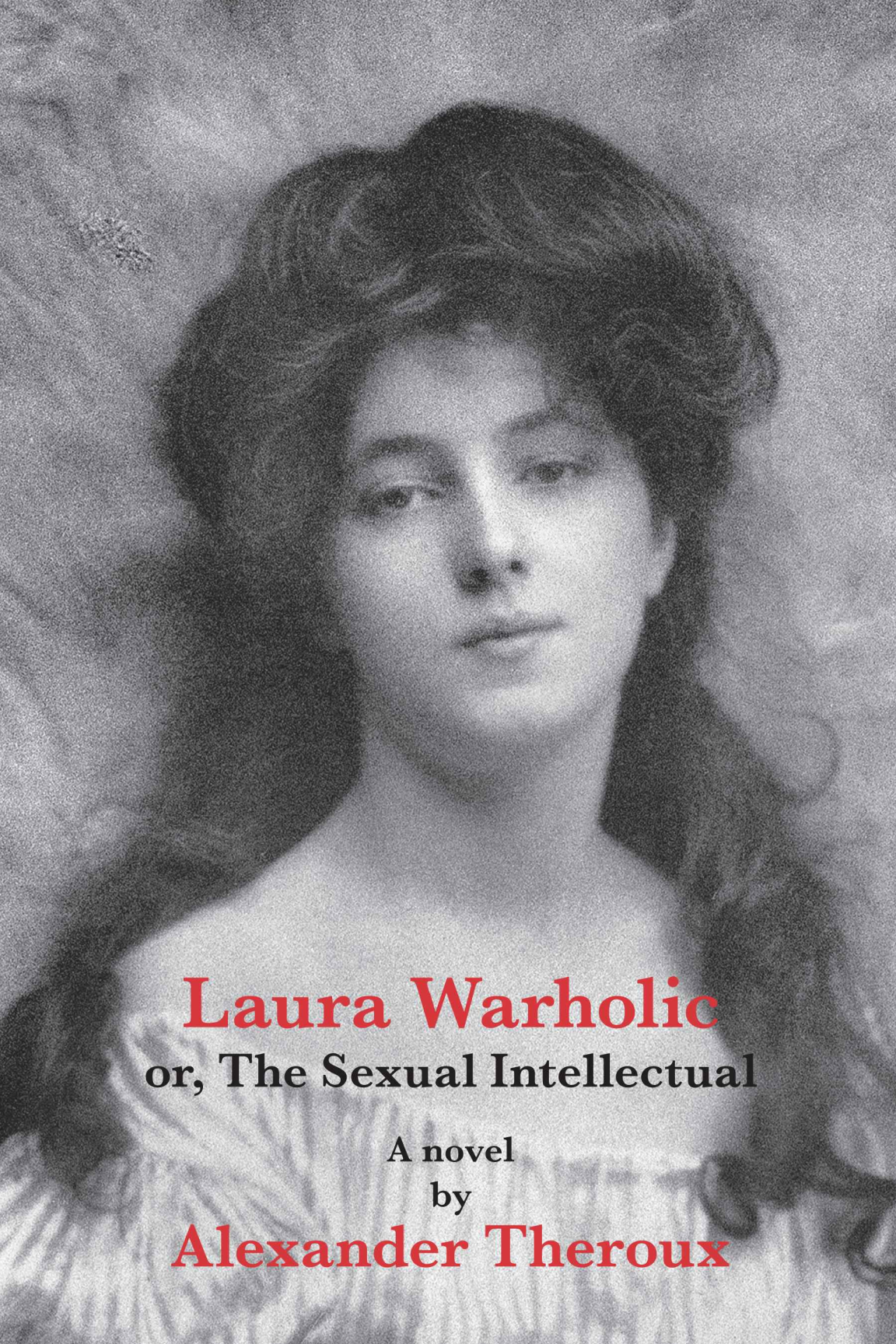


Laura Warholic

or, The Sexual Intellectual

A novel

by

Alexander Theroux

ALEXANDER THEROUX

Laura Warholic

or,

The Sexual Intellectual

A novel

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for Sarah
ab imo pectore

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Vectors converge in tensegrity but they never actually get together; they only get into critical proximities and twist by each other.

—*R. Buckminster Fuller*

You can write on a wall with a fish heart, it's because of the phosphorus.

—*Anne Carson*

The crows maintain that a single crow could destroy the heavens. Doubtless that is so, but it proves nothing against the heavens, for the heavens signify simply: the impossibility of crows.

—*Franz Kafka*

There is another world, but it is in this one.

—*Paul Eluard*

Every sin is the result of a collaboration.

—*Stephen Crane, "The Blue Hotel"*

I
Womanifesto

One lover is always murdered in the act of love. A man poetically "dies"—Elizabethan slang for orgasm—at the moment of crisis. But in the encounter does a woman, impaled on passion, die as well in her surrendering swoon? The question goes far deeper than merely asking where love goes; when losing ourselves in an embrace we exchange fates. There is no disfigurement in reproduction, it is clear, only restatement. In a real sense, every shape is a letter. I am only asking, in the final detente of coupledom, who survives and why?

wrote "The Sexual Intellectual," recollection taking precedence over tact to illustrate a point of love as he raced to finish his column. He glanced out his office window to a sky the color of pewter. It was the kind of late September afternoon, dark and rainy, smelling of fog and old quilts, that reminded him he lived in a seaside city. As he wrote from scribblings taken from a notebook in his coat pocket—he always kept two books there, one to write in, one to read—his eyes hurt, for he was almost as blind as Orion.

Eugene Eyestones, partly because he hated his job at *Quink*, a monthly magazine, was late as usual with this installment, an ongoing self-dialogue—a solipsist can only talk to himself—on the subject of love, the one planet in the universe, as he often said, where everyone is a stranger. What can one say touching on the subject of romance

when the ache of love so often resembles the ache of grief and guilt? It presented in its moods and mysteries the world's most severe paradoxes. How difficult it was for two people to be at the same emotional place at the same time! Lust, sex, passion, desire, jealousy, fear: were they not the source of man's profoundest terrors and tragedies in the oligopoly of broken hearts? Or was he merely thinking of the commercial journal for which he now worked? It was a serviceable enterprise incorporating feature articles, profiles, book and movie reviews, literary interviews, sports, poetry, photos, and various monthly columns, and aimed for a kind of hip, low-life expressionism with a view to culture by way of a neo-tabloidal formula in which each fragment seemed comprehensible, while the whole enterprise was one of anarchy, at least to Eyestones.

He had been going through hell during the last few months by way of a public scandal over a controversial essay he had written on the thorny subject of women, creativity, and the laws of nature. The piece had generated more heat than another, smaller, inflammatory article he had written several years before on the criminal assault of six savage, unrepentant black rapists upon a jogger in Central Park, when he had referred to them—they had bashed her head in with a brick, spilled 80 percent of her blood, and left her for dead—as "monkeys who did not deserve the space they lived in." That he had never intentionally employed the noun as a racial insult did not matter, not when the political shills and conniving imbeciles and dunces of both colors got hold of it in the politically correct arena, for immediately voices were raised demanding he be fired.

Taking off his eyeglasses, Eyestones wiped his eyes, paused, and slipped out of his desk drawer in order to ponder its luminous splendor a photo of a beautiful blonde woman. Staring in at her face, pure and meltingly lovely, he wondered was E. M. Cioran correct when observing, "The hermits of the first centuries of Christianity were saints at grips with the dearest of all their possessions: *their temptations*"? The photo was one that unbeknownst to her he had taken by the old bandstand just off Tremont Street in the Boston Common when, surreptitiously, he had to feign with his camera that he was aiming at a mallard! His deep passion for her, glowing brightly in his heart now for three months, would not go away. Strangely, he had never spoken to her. Oddly, it didn't matter to him.

Who was it who remarked that love ceases to be a pleasure when it

ceases to be a secret? We are always between two decisions, he thought. Two eyes, seeing double, avoid diverging images in order to contect one. A dilemma, by definition, always has two horns.

The telephone on his desk rang. It was Warholic, the editor, shouting for his copy. Swiveling around in his chair, Eyestones checked his watch, assured him he was almost finished, and hung up. He produced a blue-and-white teapot and one of several cups from a long-since-broken set and heated a pot of water on a hotplate. Shaking out a fistful of Good & Plentys, he mumped them, put the photo away, read what he had written, thought it too abstract—even confusing—and then took up his pen and continued to write.

It is the subject of *telegony* that addresses the carrying over of the influence of the sire on the offspring of subsequent matings of the female with other males, and of course, speaking of long-term relationships, the volume of that influence cannot be insignificant. An apposite joke comes to mind. He: "I've spent enough money on you to buy a battleship." She: "And you've spent enough in me to float it." As the joke subsides, however, we find ourselves facing another, graver consequence. A white woman—

He paused briefly, hesitating for a moment to make reference to race again, no matter how innocuous, following so damnably upon the Central Park fiasco, but then thought *bugger it* and went ahead and wrote what he wished.

A white woman who has first lived with a black man and then afterwards with a man of her own race will often present her second husband or lover with a more or less intensely colored child. Modified (telegonized) by her first cohabitant, the woman cannot deny that first blood dominates. *Di uovo bianco spesso pulcin nero*, as the Italian proverb goes. But another matter of consequence is raised, a serious and even disturbing one, that touches not only the telegonized mother and the nature of her child but the core of the identity of a woman, indeed her very alteration. In other words, I am asking what of the influence on the female body by the repeated insemination of the male when trillions of sperm neither needed nor used for purposes of fertilization are absorbed by a woman's mucous tissues and make her gradually more and more like her mate?

How easy it is to write about the complexities of love, he thought,

even to give advice to others in matters of the heart that one did not take oneself. Since he both was and was not involved with a woman, a small matter yet to sort itself out, he found it strangely curious the way *love* is anagrammatized in the word *involved*. A writer who must remain in a real sense immune to experience, the better to analyze it, must also in reality be at the mercy of it. And yet afterwards he often does not know whether he owes more to the impulses that drive him to meet his life or to the aloofness that inexorably disentangles him again to comment on it. Was love an empty monstrance awaiting the sacred host of our heart? It was a new feeling for him, love, since for a long while he had willfully frustrated his appetites and fought to get sex out of his system. What lines of Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa had he once written down and kept under his helmet? "The fields, after all, are not as green for those who are loved, / As for those who are not. / To feel is to be distracted." It seemed so long ago. Whenever his good friend Duxbak asked him upon leaving on Fridays what he'd be doing for the weekend, Eyestones always laughingly replied, "'Alone is wisdom, alone is happiness,' quoth Emerson," although Eyestones was never quite certain that he believed it.

Duxbak looked like a ball in tall grass. Viewed at the office as a solitary, pint-sized, overly earnest jerk-genius, and because he abstained from joining in various games of office ridicule, standard behavior there, he was mocked as a fool and called a "TBF," as he unfashionably buttoned the top button of his "flag," or shirt. He looked inexplicably umbrellaless and rained-on in the way a penguin looks like a sad little man. He was in fact a contented fellow whose face shone as bright as a Christmas bulb. He wore his glasses on a grosgrain cord that dangled around his neck. He wore a pocket watch, kept strict timetables, referred to clothes as "duds," pillowcases as "pillowskins," paperclips as "trombones," and unself-consciously sported a cap-with-flaps in winter. "He irons his lunch" became a joke at the office, but the fact is he actually did so in order to try to keep the bulkiness of his sandwiches flat. He also matter-of-factly used outdated expressions such as "topnotch," "suit yourself," "What a dandy of a day," "darned if I don't," "swell," "And how!" and whenever he happened to be leaving the office he always waved his hat—he wore one in every season—and cheerfully called out, often to no one, "Abyssinia," a unique Duxbakian take on the phrase, "I'll be seeing you." He always consistently but somewhat crackpatedly said "forth and back" instead of "back and

forth." A strong religious faith governed his positive outlook and his way of trying to buck someone up in a cheerless mood was to say, "Worse things happen at sea." Of all his verbal crotchets, however, none was more heartily repeated at critical times, invariably to reinforce his faith that all was well—but it was also a salute—than "The egrets have appeared in Methuen." There were some hints that he fasted and prayed and on weekends worked in a soup kitchen. He was not old, for all that quaintness, only in his late forties. He knew a lot about antiquated habits and old methods, such as how to peel a chestnut and what a snath was and when herring ran and why, and the difference between a wedge and a froe. His shyness was in fact gentleness, the gentleness of a person at peace with himself. He was the servant candle, kind and loyal, and, although intrepid in his solitude, one who felt the sufferings of others, even to the point of giving away most of what he owned to Saint Vincent de Paul charities. He supposedly owned nothing but the clothes he stood up in. Although harassed at the office by rumor, innuendo, and intimidation, a form of workplace violence called "mobbing," he was not so much indifferent to guile as not alert to it. The fact of the matter was, he led a spotless life. No one knew it of course because no one knew him.

Quink, which had a modest subscription list, was also sold in various newsstands, bookstores and, uniquely, coffee shops—a corporate merger beneficial to reader and drinker—throughout the Greater Boston and Cambridge areas and several larger cities in New England. It was the project of an editor's lucky idea, his mother's money, and a fairly talented clique of ambitious, hustling, infighting writers, music critics, movie-reviewers, food-writers, people whose job it was to see and be seen, to gossip, to move in social circles, and to get near the edge of what they felt was current in the media, politics, and fashion, a competitive aggregation of semitalented if mean-spirited oddballs: news dinks, journalists, disgruntled critics, grumpy reviewers, culture obsessives, and wise-cracking hangers-on who worked their small jobs and came up with the commercial fads and formulations that made up the contents of the magazine. Its offices could be found on the opposite side of a long arcade-lined entrance to a three-story building on High Street, near the Quincy Market. A piano company occupied business space on the ground floor, and there were two separate entrances to the main building, as were there not in life, it always amused Eyestones to ponder, dear lady, dreadful tiger?

Duxbak, short and stout as a cruller, came waddling down the corridor, quacking, "E², E², is your copy ready yet? I've got to shake the tree."

Eyestones had always tried to be readable in his continuing observations on the subject of love, a subject that included, among other things, sex—to him the one universal topos of mankind's mystery and, regarding people, the first window to need. Has the groin a brain? The intellect a gland? And what of the mind is in the face, he wondered, the soul in the eyes? How we adjust ourselves to the luck of our face, and yet how that same face itself often fails to give a clue to ourselves, he thought, momentarily taking a look at his reflection in the late afternoon window peering back at him like a dark, disapproving pirate. He was a tall fellow, something over six feet, with dark searching eyes and straight brown hair that, reaching to his collar, gave him a look of Bohemian carelessness. There was in his look both strength and gentleness, the kind of searching and chiseled alertness his friends associated with the kind of apostolic face found in Renaissance studies. An innocence about him—sometimes a remarkable ineptitude in dealing with matters of daily life—belied his searching intelligence. He generally wore corduroy jackets, jeans, loafers. A lucid ironist with a sharp nose for the fraudulent, hypertensive, intellectual, curious—he quickly formed opinions—he was ruled by various aversions, chief among which was bullshit in all its proliferating forms, subtle and gross, reaching from the pie-faced morons telling lies on television to the calculating lies of common acquaintances to the most private, much more devastating lies we tell ourselves as the desperate last-resort ferocities we all of us use to escape guilt and guile. Slavish adherence to popular opinion for him was particularly revolting, although he tried to read everything he could and compulsively needed to know. Giving up one's freedom was not merely some petty human foible but rather the corrupted essence of our entire scrape and remained for Eyestones our most serious existential predicament. He was as poorly sighted as a kiwi and, wearing thick glasses, peered out from a perceptibly deep place with a look that went far inside you—that is, if you were what he happened to be looking at. One somehow never knew.

He was also eccentric. His friendships were few, sometimes combative, charged with a shared eagerness and jumpy impatience. A fierce unsociable side fed that impatience. He was *farouche*, at times. A controlled exterior belied a person who often and easily felt wronged, but

he believed that his enemies, people he disliked, fabricated a way for him to know justice by way of what he had to scorn. It took the obnubilation of an idiot to be loyal to mankind in general, he felt. And the minor remedy he took from the otherwise incapacitating jugheads who despised him was that they only confirmed his discipline in this vale of tears to be less obsolete. He wrote poetry, sent it to magazines, had even published two small volumes. He tended to ritualize everything: the way to do things. His most successful personal relationships were sustained by writing letters. He hated telephones, faxes, e-mail—being *reached!* He wrote daily, drove too fast, cooked with joy if not flair, loved to hike, and just happened to be an authority, self-taught, on the behavior of crows, a study he had taken up in youth: how they lived, ate, fought, nested, socialized, and survived. He loved books, much preferred reading to being with people, and to the scandal and disapproval of many of his acquaintanences had arranged his life that way. He walked with a relentlessly canted forward motion that somehow gave the impression that wind was involved. He disliked the media, almost never watched television, despised corporate hustlers, mistrusted all authority—everyone from prelates to politicians—and, having long ago come to see that both the Democratic and Republican parties were each as thin as a wafer, had no faith whatsoever in government. Whereas at one point in his life he would have gladly launched, unprodded, into passionate diatribes in the belief that he could change people's minds, he was no longer convinced that anything he wrote ever really mattered. It was not so much due to diffidence or the onset of doubt as to the more significant fact he had gone so long without the communication of intimacy.

Like all self-inquisitive people, he began to find destiny a personal malignant, a challenge he felt he had to face in the ongoing conversations, more or less his social life, that he always had with himself. It was a dialogue born of his belief that the meaning of life, much of it, could in fact be found. It involved courage, to a degree. When he was growing up, whenever anything really frightened him, he felt the need of going too far in that very dark direction simply to prove himself capable not so much of feeling courage as experiencing freedom. Originality, which was an aspect of freedom, meant more to him than anything. As a little boy, in an attempt to be unique, he would often try to do something that he felt at the certain point of a moment, one particular instant, no one in the whole wide world would be doing—like staring at the W on

a Wheaties box or focusing on a small particular robin on a branch or, say, smelling page 12 of a copy of *Robinson Crusoe*. Just knowing in his mind that no one else on earth but he alone was doing that *very thing* at that *very moment* could become a thrill for him. Eugene Eyestones was a dreamer. He did not weep from trouble because of his dreams. They constituted the place where, in his solitude, he deeply felt something. He often reverted in his mind with fond, almost mystical remembrance to walking suspended-like—a recurrent dream of his—through, into, *in*, an Edmund Dulac illustration of a medieval fairy tale, his earliest childhood picture-book. Dreaming was for Eyestones a distinct way of living elsewhere, like walking through the world wearing a pair of green spectacles. A diagnostic pair he actually owned.

A watchful person, he was mostly silent, generally reflective, unless one asked him a question, whereupon he would often give a full, articulate, always scholarly, sometimes pedantic answer, with a little more information than most people usually cared to know. He was referred to at the office at less insulting, charitable moments as "The Man with the Faraway Eyes." "Some people live too much in their heads" was the office-wide judgment on him. He spoke with a kind of rushing, ongoing, over-vaulting insistence of speech that was generally pleasant, soft and identifiable by a sort of insistent stutter. He neither gave nor received orders well. His imagination functioned better when he was alone. For his own peace of mind he divided existence up into a pie chart of three distinct parts: nature; culture (books, music, etc.); and then the workaday world, this last a grouping he met with a descending curve of vitality and which he tried to ignore. His aloofness was the occasion of a taunting quatrain that Discknickers, one of his colleagues, once taped to his desk-lamp:

> All of us always see Eyestones
> pondering sex like a sly bones,
> but, regarding people, Eugene
> is constantly heard but not seen.

In a sense Eyestones's pessimism arose from a true idealism, a deep-seated yearning for a better order, a wish to find perfection in the chaotic facts of reality, an impulse that stood and stands behind much art.

He lived alone. He had never married. He had had many pointless affairs over the years, substituting one ghost for another, and had

dated everyone from pretty models to malnourished ballerinas to shiny socialites and at one time even had a relationship in New York City with a peremptory old heiress with Chinese eyes and a face-lift like mercury glass silvering shut her head like a gazing ball in a garden. But in the end what had they wanted and had it been him? Was H. L. Mencken wrong when he stated that not one woman in a hundred ever marries her first choice among marriageable men? He could not say. But he tended to develop intense, irrational crushes and in his enthusiasm once even spent $125 on a ticket that he could ill afford in order to attend a banquet just to sit, even if at a remote table, in the same room with the exquisite Queen Noor of Jordan, whose beauty utterly distracted him. It was his firm belief that nothing in the whole wide world for pure loveliness could ever match the beauty of a woman. No vast mountain. No white soaring bird. No iridescent sunset. It was a vision in its singular if charming magnificence almost complicit with the nature of disillusion itself. On the other hand, since a good many intermediary plagiarisms always coexisted with and indeed often co-opted that glory he also saw that, while adding to their complexity, such things separated us from the light of our dreams. Examining the heart and the head had always intrigued him, the complicated soul, especially what challenged, often provoked, even jeopardized, its stability. It was ideas that he loved, plain and simple. He was an intellectual.

Acquiring and imparting information was a method of meditation for him, a sort of cyclic attempt to keep impermanence in mind as a kind of living proof that he was moving, and as a kind of promise of growth. A Buddhist monk whom he had once met up in the wet highlands of Chiang Mai had shown him how, saying, "The chief problem is the inadequate space of the prayer hall." Although Eyestones, who had been fighting at the time in Vietnam and was not sure if that was spiritual advice or a simple worry about accommodation, had ultimately decided it did not make a difference and had taken it to heart

After he had returned from combat, he realized by a habit of the heart that he wanted not so much happiness anymore as awareness. He saw less and less the logic of the world, but figured that if with each word we win a victory over emptiness and loss, some faith was nevertheless proposed as a way to cope. He never wanted to be one thing after he had returned. During his hitch in Vietnam he constantly read the poems of poet Fernando Pessoa and had gone so far as to learn Portuguese to read them in the original. The poems were all true.

The poems, along with a young woman there whom he had loved, had saved his life. They both came from and fed the archives of his blood, annulling the pain and annealing his spirit. He went through faith and unfaith. "The world is whatever is in us." "Things are because we see them." "The search for truth always confers, if the search merits a prize, the ultimate knowledge of its nonexistence." What did he once whisper at a friend's burial there, weeping onto his boots, when hearing the words he suddenly smiled?

> If I had succeeded
> In not asking who I was,
> I would have forgotten
> How forgotten I am.
> The wheat waves in the sun
> Always aloof and equal.

A sexual intellectual was another paradox. It had not been his own idea, neither the job nor the title, but he had needed money, and it was work, even though he was being paid through a bean-blower. He knew a lot about the subject because he read a lot and thought about what he read. In his late forties, Warholic, the editor who had hired him, was a blowhard with big doughy thighs and enormous cheeks that whenever he spoke gave off a weird buccalingual echo. His nose resembled the numeral 6. He was prematurely balding, and the odd innovative patterns and failed but slick geometries he used to comb the little hair he had left paradoxically did less to cover the baldness than draw attention to it. He was always in his office either eating lox sticks or unfairly bawling out one of the people who worked for him but whom he viewed as nothing but useless prats. What columns ran, when, where, and why, were his bailiwick, and any that failed to meet his approval felt the sting of his tongue, which seemed almost long enough to wipe his nostrils, like a cow's. He was as the food he fed on—he habitually visited sex clubs at night—and, insisting in his typically bullying and misogynistic way ("Women should come with directions!") that a sex column, a well-informed one, was a must for the magazine, a fascinating sort of pollution, he had hired Eyestones, who over time however had turned it into a successful if somewhat controversial forum. It had become popular. And most importantly—to Warholic—made money.

Warholic was a food glutton. He also picked fights, trying to goad

targets into counteracting him, was a bean-counter, and held grudges. He had to win. He pursued vendettas. His present antagonism was directed at his former wife, a raddled woman named Laura, with whom he had lived in San Francisco for five years, briefly married, and then divorced within six weeks. He presumed himself free of her until he found out that, with draconian fury, she had traipsed after him to the Boston area where, upon getting settled herself if not with the comforting finality that word implies, she began to embarrass herself and everybody else by making scenes at the office whenever she chose to stop by.

"Eyestones, is that goddamn column done yet?" came a voice booming over an intercom. Eugene saw in his mind's eye the rising of the baleful moon. It was Warholic shouting the fourth time that afternoon. "Such a *kushiyah*!"

Obese, tall, cynical, Warholic had the thick, everted lips of Oscar Wilde and a moon-fat face that gave him the grey, oily look of soft cheese. He was a big balloon of a man whose luffing bagginess made him look even more portly than he was, but his hands were small and soft and always employed in quick, cozening motions. He had a long, mean head, jutting high and blocklike but tending to the ovoidal when straining with anger. While a morbid fatness blurred his features, making it impossible for his face even to hold any other expression than the discontented and cantankerous hoggishness that was habitual to it, its lineaments always rattled into focus when he set his menace loose. He reeked of kreplach and oniony sweat. His suits were splurched, his ties usually wide, gaudy things, mostly of yellow and oven-gold, and he always squished when he walked on shoes with cheap neoprene soles. It was only one of the many ironies of the day that it was Warholic and his ex-wife, a woman whom Eugene Eyestones had unfortunately come to know by way of the turmoil she brought into his own life, as into the lives of others—creating in the cat's cradle of his trying to help her a hideous triangulation with the editor—who had, together, inadvertently given him, Eyestones, the idea for the particular column that, late as usual, he was now racing to complete.

But as the sperm of a woman's mate fertilizes her eggs, why should it come as a surprise to anyone to learn that his repeated infusions would by the same means necessarily modify, shape, and eventually determine the blood of his mate? And would it not follow as night does day that she would

eventually begin to approximate or even duplicate him physiologically, who knows, maybe even psychologically, almost as if by direct quotation, in the same way the women in Vincent Van Gogh's painting *The Potato Eaters* crudely take on the look of potatoes? A woman's body inevitably changes; why not also her mind? Don't the Chinese believe that jade, if worn long enough, becomes part of the person who wears it? The ancient Zoroastrian that one need but have a dream to enter it?

After a certain length of time, does it not seem biologically logical that a sexually active woman's blood that has been so long the receptacle of the same man's sperm must be saturated over the years with what inevitably must reconstruct it? Redesign it in favor of his own DNA? Rob her of the very quiddities by which she was once what she was? It involves the paradox that states what water gives, water takes away. Just as medical inoculations hold out the possibility of an efficient immunity against disease for a lifetime, can we not by analogy conclude that a mate's sperm confers on the blood and through it on the whole female organism not only properties it had not possessed before their invasion but, indeed, the crucial template of the designate male? "She had even begun to *look* like him," observes Jane Scovill of Oona Chaplin, who was married to Charlie Chaplin for thirty years. "Her face was losing its classic angularity, deep circles appeared below her eyes, her cheeks had an enile ruddiness." Isn't such a transformation only the inevitable result of any extended interrelationship between lovers?

Love literally conspires in the swapping of mooning hearts to form a union of two. A woman with her kisses disappears.

We become the dog we buy.

Eyestones read the page over. Was it cynical? Too facile? If so, was it any better to avoid subjects that were controversial or indifferently ignore them? To his heedless or neutral colleagues his standoffishness was cynicism, in any case, indicating a sort of disengaged amusement. Or so most of them felt. Others considered it merely an attempt at his refusing to share his vitality. While still others found his serious disposition to be the result of some mad arithmetic being calculated in his mind to solve any sorrows he had seen. What did it matter when all of it was self-scrutiny anyway? "I'm almost finished," he told Warholic. "I'll give it to Duxbak for his opinion, copy-edit it, and have it in editorial in a half-hour, OK?"

What is curious is that some women, as if by instinct, some deep biological refusal, *oppose* telegony. "The Duke's Test," a blood test that is used to discover whether a woman's inability to conceive might be due to her partner's sperm, is the index. Doesn't it measure what she rejects? Isn't her body stating not only that it seeks to avoid getting pregnant but also that in a more profound sense she as a woman flatly refuses to be owned, to be mastered?

"Everywhere in the living world male generative cells are brought forth in an overwhelming abundance," wrote Dr. Jules Goldschmidt of Paris in the *Medical Review of Reviews* (April 1921), pointing up the significant fact that nature works with excessive profusion, offering us the essential example of millions of spermatozoa being spent in order to fertilize but a single egg. Goldschmidt then points out that "it is inconceivable that the uncounted other male cells are condemned to useless death without any action on the entire female organism, into which, by reason of their mobility they can easily penetrate either into the mucous membrane of the uterus or into the lymphatic and blood capillaries, and through them into the whole circulation." It is in this aspect that sexual intercourse is, arguably, not so much a dialogue as a monologue in which men do all the talking. I have often thought that men in their smug superiority actually pursue sex in the way they seek to sculpt, or strive to shape. What would better feed the ego of the tribal narcissist than to know that he can gradually transform his mate into himself? But does what he sculpt in fact acquire the lineaments of the original? The lineaments, perhaps, but not the exact line. How could it? After a certain period, the recharacterized woman is no more herself after the transfer of fluids than a photographic portrait is a true likeness. It is rather a fact transformed into an opinion, a stolen simulacrum, a selected modality, accurate in that, while all photographs are accurate, in the final transformation none of them is quite the truth.

After knocking at the door, Duxbak came running in and, beagling over his friend's shoulder, took up several sheets to read them. Few people ever came to Eyestones's office, but for Duxbak he poured a cup of tea. He was his friend, and it was only Duxbak he would allow to look over his shoulder, otherwise a phobia of his. He had started this unlikely job with a bit of altruism, believing that it would give to this middling magazine a dimension its mainly literary thrust needed, but the subject for its vast, bewildering fullness, like trying to square a circle, was rarely right whenever he looked at it and never the same

whenever he looked again. Not surprisingly, his reliance on himself and the aspects of his life as any kind of valid index for his views of love—his heart was his soul, his art was his goal—made him feel, as time passed, less and less confidant of what to say.

Duxback looked up and said, "A peach of a piece, I should judge, and the usual straight-talk express"—he seemed wistful—"but aren't you setting the table for another set of headaches, dear man?"

"I suppose so."

"Remember the other essay?"

"Who could forget?"

"By the way," asked Duxbak, "is it that the very *first* male partner is the one who leaves the indelible impress on the female he sexually possesses?"

"So some say," said Eyestones, pouring a cup of tea for himself. "That is perhaps why in a man's compulsive hunt for virginity—who knows?—there actually may be an unconscious drive for self-identity."

Pausing to ponder Warholic's baleful influence on the personality of his dithering wife Laura, a personality that he had found equally baleful, Eyestones could not deny that he had found the best example of telegony right under his nose. He realized Warholic was not her first lover but felt that, for all he knew, he may have been the longest.

"In the land of the giving, the temptation is to take," he said. "Anyway, given the colonialist proclivities of mankind, isn't the unchartered whiteness of a map always a challenge to conquest?"

"And to possession," said Duxbak, shaking his head in pity. "Indeed, indeed."

"What inseminates, replicates," said Eyestones. "A face is as forged as a photo." Checking his watch, Eyestones sat down to write out the last page of his article, concentrating on bringing it to conclusion.

The more complicated question as to whether or not the lover who unconsciously seeks to reproduce himself recapitulates the photographer seeking inner significance through actual forms is difficult to answer. Where is the deliberating mind that ponders its thoughts in pursuit of a body? Furthermore, is a man depleted who gives and so made less? Rendered weaker? Does a woman completely die to herself? And to ask the poet's question of the act, does she put on his knowledge with his power? Finally, what on earth does nature intend as the result of this mysterious mirror of identities? Is copulation imperialism? Promiscuity a means of

self-perpetuation, adventurism, and control? Isn't it possible that sex is as much a method of the male gene for getting itself copied as it is nature's way of fertilizing an egg? Is it a question of union or exploitation? Sedition? Pollution? Svengali-like creation? Is it a question of the adulteration of blood or the enhancement of it? Or should general judgments be avoided? How so in the matter of genes? Won't ironic alterations of pedigree, finally, result in transforming women so? Won't low eventually speak to high in mad abandon? With conycatchers ultimately proving cousin to Carolingian kings, and kitchen cooks to cardinals? And shall it not follow that high goes to low? Among the ancestors of the Marquis de Sade could be found the Laura of Petrarch's sonnets.

Eyestones slipped the last sheet over to Duxbak. The Sexual Intellectual! It was precisely because Eyestones was *not* a connoisseur of eros, quite the opposite, in fact, that without recourse to drivel or drama he could manage to write his monthly column out of the orts and sorts of his life, from books, from thinking, from research, from various relationships he had long ago assigned, not unhappily, to the distant past. He loved the solitude he had to think about such things. His circumstances bred his questions. Was it self-delusion to feel, he wondered, that a lack of attachment seemed to make one more rather than less objective, more alert to everything, less pulled in the arbitrary or biased directions that a good many others faced? Solitude is in a sense a deepening of the present, and he kept his counsel when time presented itself by realizing that art—music and books—for the longest time had been preponderating over his life more than the actual living of it. By restricting his small needs to a few essentials, keeping his mind fixed to his thoughts, he was managing, to avoid unnecessary complexity. With one notable exception, and she had died in the bloom of youth, he loved but had not fallen in love with the women who had loved him—at least until now.

"No apostrophe before 'varsity'?" asked Duxbak, pointing to the sheet. "It's a colloquial term for university. Old-school spelling. Not important."

"Thanks," said Eyestones, laughing, amused at his friend's specific, if antique, diligence. "I've developed a theory about Beethoven's *Violin Concerto in D major, Opus 61*, which I was listening to last night," said Eyestones. "I am convinced that anything so multifarious, any work of art that can run the spectrum of emotions like that, must be about

love, nothing else, only love—desire, jealousy, passion, hope, loss, joy, all variations of it. Just everything. The whole story of it. All of its snakes and ladders. The deepest emotions."

Whether he was staring up at the height of hope or descending into the valley of resentments, Eyestones was a pilgrim of the Absolute. He believed, queerly, doggedly, that it was more difficult, more disappointing, for an intelligent person to go through life than for a dimmer one to do so, simply because as the sense of loss and the sight of failure was everywhere, and most discernible in oneself, no misery along those lines could not be avoided and having to be felt had to be faced. "I am a sorcerer," Eyestones once told Duxbak, laughing, "who in the mere waving of it fears the magic of his very own wand!" He also believed that it was a person's *knowledge* alone that persisted after death and that was majestically brought to heaven, which made him value more than anything a working intelligence, thought, fed by reading, cultivating the brain, discussion, insight. The sole purpose of one's life, he believed, was to find out the meaning of it.

Duxbak finished reading.

"You don't like it."

"No, I do," said Duxbak, who more than anyone knew his friend's heart. In an extended pause, they exchanged a long, meaningful glance that Eugene understood. They kept few secrets from each other, the two of them.

"But what about that last line in your piece?"

He had witnessed some scenes of Warholic's ex-wife.

"I mentioned only the name. Petrarch's infatuation," said Eyestones. "Look, in a way it's even flattering to her."

His friend simply waited.

"All right, all right," said Eyestones. "Strike the last two sentences."

Duxbak dutifully crossed out the lines, quickly ran out, and raced the pages up to editorial as fast as he could. It was the end of a long week, thankfully Friday. Putting on his coat, Eyestones crossed to the editor's office, making sure as he passed the bank of switches by the stairs to put out the lights in descending order, a tropism for order with which he found himself lately burdened. Was it something he had brought back from Southeast Asia, a reaction-formation, the need to feel order as a defense mounted to ward off the feeling that one was going to pieces? It had begun with a minor obsession with counting. But it had strangely grown. He had lately begun compulsively reopening

the lids of mailboxes to be certain his mailed letters got swallowed. He now always sat on the left side at the cinema and proportioned items of food on a plate so as to finish none first, and he had even started mentally reconstructing horizons wherever and whenever he saw aesthetic insufficiencies in them that did not fit his mind's eye. He was ready to leave but not before poking his head into the editor's office to explain that the delay of his column was due to the fact that, having written two versions of it, he had to choose which was better. It was the parable of the man with two watches: never now can he have the right time. Eyestones walked down the stairs and went out. The sky overhead was still grey as an eraser but the rain had stopped. Warholic, opening an upper window, shouted down the side of the building with bloviating loudness, "Hey, Eyestones, we're all doubles, right?"

"Are you referring to Zoroaster?"

"I'm talking about multiplication!" yelled Warholic. "There are two men in all of us!"

What a good definition of nothingness, he thought, going out into the autumn dusk, knowing—unfortunately knowing—the myopic always sees double.

And sometimes twice.

II
Sorcerer at the Crossroads

Stepping into a tiny doorway on Court Street, upon a sudden recollection, Eyestones took out a pen and, pausing to write what had momentarily jogged his mind, hastily scribbled, "'The spiritualization of sensuality': Nietszche's definition of love." Or was that squaring a circle? he wondered. Looking into a shopwindow, blinking through his glasses, he considered his reflection, wondering what he knew—or saw. The Man with the Faraway Eyes. Or were they empty? Tobit. Oedipus. Hodur. Rhoecus. Ruggiero. Tiresias. Zedekiah. Melesigenes. Phineus. Milton. The Man with the Faraway Eyes.

It was an ironic name, he thought, for someone who saw nothing clearly. His quiet, somewhat doubtful manner, a warm, rapid, slightly, strained voice, all-American but unobtrusive good looks, held no flash, and his eyes—was it the eyeglasses?—contained a rather surprising element of sadness. Subtle changes were already in progress in his being. A man, a cripple, suddenly lurched by him. Eyestones recognized the poor beggar by sight, he had seen him often, but had no idea what he wanted. His afflicted face revealed someone bent on a prolonged course of self-destruction as he halted above the long stairs descending to Quincy Market, clearly waiting, as he looked about, scowling with irritation and stamping with the obstinacy of that gimp leg. Visibly his own awful ghetto, the man seemed to be fearfully looking about for a ghost himself. He fidgeted and peered about. Rumor had it that he had

lived in a mental hospital. His hair was brushed flat like shelf-paper. He was all dementedly buttoned-up, with a thin belt hooked several notches too tight, a frayed shirt buttoned to his neck, and grey wrinkled trousers hitched incompetently high above his shoe-tops. It was as if such grips failed to hold together whatever was left of the small, aggrieved man, burnt by some horrid fate, to keep him from falling apart entirely. The cripple turned to look at Eyestones, hesitated, then abruptly lurching back a few steps he suddenly stopped—it was terrifying to see a human face crisscrossed with such menace—and muttered with a slur, "Wlet me guess. You know Wlaura, too?"

Good God, thought Eyestones, *is there some kind of perverse panopticon in this fallen world?*

His name was Micepockets, but at the office they all derisively referred to him as Curbstepper, for the gimp, unequal way he walked. The wind rose suddenly like a man leaping out of bed and blew up the stairs. But now the mind and heart of Eyestones had gone elsewhere. Autumn ghosts. Dusky phantoms coursing the Boston streets with obsessed and rigorous inspection. There was an air of mystery, of the mystic, in the mood, for Eyestones, looking through the bakery window, saw again the fresh, lovely face of the woman there with its pure, white forehead, almost an adolescent's, attentive beneath her soft, ash-blonde hair. It was the secret he had kept from everyone, including himself. Buying bread, however, he had once managed to glimpse an employee-list by a telephone on a wall there and deduced who she was. His heart almost constricted. What a fallacy that alphabetization creates a democracy among names! Like a notion held, a new idea harbored. To fall in love is to have the experience of being reborn, instantly seeing yourself, not for what you are, but for what you could be. One aches for the chance, half-terrified of course for the opportunity, for if it is to have a renewed and exalted image of oneself, it is also to wonder in the solitary fulgurization of light who will be vaporized.

Who was it said that a man should marry a woman half his age, plus seven? One then becomes husband, chum, lover, advisor, soulmate, protector, and also have just a tiny hint of a father. He walked over to the bakery, and, looking through the window, his heart leapt for there she was: Rapunzel Wisht herself.

III
Rapunzel

A smell of burning leaves in the air, that smoky blue mist, draped a veil of mystery about the overall city like the excitement gripping his heart. It had become Eyestones's habit after work to stop at the bakery, where his heart always made a small genuflection, a knix of incommunicable delight. Rapunzel—who moved toward him, smiling, as if walking on the tips of grass stems—was handing a customer a loaf of bread. She was tall, and with her soft unspoiled green eyes, she resembled a Melozzo da Forlì angel from her lovely face to her long legs. Her mouth with a touch of lipstick the color of Tuscan stucco, purple and rose revealed a kind of sexual innocence and always seemed a centimeter short of closing, revealing the whitest teeth. Had this lovely woman been dipped in jewel-luster? How graceful was her smooth forehead, her delicate brow, those hands so pale and slender. She had a graceful, unaffected openness and the gold of her Merovingian blondeness shone with the promise of youth. She seldom spoke, he often noticed, but her smile was warm and appealing, and he read a lot into it. Women, Eyestones knew, were God's greatest creation, Nature's first adornment. When Rapunzel stopped to look up and smile mischievously at him through the window—on this day her hair was feathered like rosemary—he felt as if a nurturing sun warmed a heart sodden with rain for many years and that somehow she had the power to give him life. He had no reason whatsoever to feel that way and,

needless to say, less of a right right. But she had become light itself to him. Golden shine! The glistening nebula of bright Orion, he thought. Secretive hunter! Spontaneous incandescence! Illumination itself! *I love you so much I could die,* he told her in a whisper to his starving heart.

Rapunzel was boxing some pastries for a matronly woman, a customer with a hatful of ceramic cherries who kept gesturing for the specific ones she wanted. The young woman's easy manner seemed to put others waiting in the line at ease. Her face made delicate with its straight nose and her expressive mouth, soft and half-opened, revealed a dreamy receptivity. She seemed in all imbued with simple purity. And that glance! Or was it possible that her look was for everybody she met? "You know what would look good on her?" came a sudden low sniggering voice behind him. "Me!" Eyestones turned. It was Little Bob Merkle from the office with his popcorn-white hair coming out of the shop where, a virtual miser, he daily stopped in to purchase the cheap day-old bread and reduced baked-goods they offered several times a week. It revolted Eyestones to hear his words about Rapunzel, for more than anything else it was her purity that mattered to him, and he wordlessly stepped wide of the leering troll. As Little Bob Merkle walked on, Eyestones concentrated only on the smile she seemed to offer him, inclining her head to catch her customer's words, as if flirtatiously to show by proving no curve can overlap itself how endlessly fascinating she was and how accommodating the majesty of beauty can be. Replenishing, resplendent, reawakening Rapunzel!

How Eyestones yearned for someone to love. In spite of his defenses, how ardently he wanted to care, to give and to feel tenderness, to know in some feverish exaltation of hope a joy like the splendor of a prayer answered! It was nothing less than a desire to find loyalty, honesty, dedication, buoyancy, intelligence in someone who wished for the same thing, even if only in the desire.

Eyestones returned her smile and although he wanted to go into the shop, he did not. It was part of his way of owning the moment. Did not Plato remind us in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* that the philosophic lover must be chaste and moderate if he is to sublimate his erotic drive and profit from it? Or was it that he feared that the effervescence of hearts has provoked disasters that no demon would have dared conceive? Strangely, he felt in his abiding silence he was closer to having her by not being rejected than he would have been if by speaking to her she merely failed to encourage him in any way by even a jot. He

was not desperate, driven only by the temporizing hope he harbored, the hesitance he had, indeed cultivated, of meeting a fact only to maintain a fiction. So the faraway lover employed one of the fundamental, if counterintuitive, axioms of courtship, and staved off meeting the woman he loved with the abiding hope, as though like a bargain with the gods above, that she would somehow come to see and feel the passion he felt more fully, recognize it, intuit it, and fulfill his fate. He was, in short, too embarrassed and shy to dare say a word. But he would not give up the dream. We never see a new moon, he thought. He knew not which way to go whither nor whither why but only chanted softly under his breath,

> "East wind blows from the South,
> South wind blows from the West,
> But who knows where the West wind goes
> From God knows where it issues forth
> As on and on and on it blows
> When the West wind blows from the North?"

Being alone was essentially all Eyestones knew. He felt that between such people there was absolutely no need for the usual form of speaking communication. He deeply believed that certain types of people arrive at mutual understanding through intuition. Or was it a delusion? Would he have been obsessed with this woman for so long, he wondered, if he had not been exceptionally reluctant to risk being rebuffed? It was too difficult to say. He decided he would keep a distance from her, try to feel gratitude, not guile, and not have to watch the magic of mountains for the memory of them. He could wait. But not have faith? Not yearn? Not believe? It was impossible

An undevout astronomer is mad.

IV
Imaginary Crumbs

South Station rose greyish-brown as a urinal. The long streets that ran down toward the old docks had the odor of fishwater and salt air. The area of congested Boston, like most of its narrow streets and congested avenues, was often incoherent with noise and traffic. Eyestones walked over to Chinatown to the Cheng Kwong Market on Essex Street, purchased a few bags of noodles, some jackfruit chips, and prawn crackers, foods he got to like long years back when he was in Southeast Asia, and then crossed over to Welfare's, a small tavern with orange awnings on a side street in which he occasionally stopped to have a drink before taking the train back to Cambridge. The bar was full of moody woodwork and tin signs with barriers of smoked glass and tables on both sides. A corporate element predominated among groups, but office workers also gathered there. The greenish-yellow, almost terrarium light suffusing the long inner-room gave the drinkers a spectral appearance like jaundiced corpses as they stood around talking. A television flickered, and loud music was playing from somewhere. The place on Fridays was crowded.

Ann Marie Tubb, the food columnist at *Quink* whose suspicious eyes prowled the busy room while she masticated a big wad of gum, gnashing incipient bubbles with a low humming growl—she had the blunt nose and stubby body of a porpoise—sat lugubriously in a side booth in

front of a stinger next to The Krauthammer, her constant companion, who, proudly wearing her favorite purple SCUM ("Society for Cutting Up Men") sweatshirt, always insisted on using only her last name. A man who had just rudely approached her got himself a good kick for it with a hobnailed boot. She was a squat, unsmiling figure, Rappaccinian in her darkness, who had a unibrow and coat-button eyes and knives for fingernails. She was jimmy-jawed and her pugnacious, pouchy face was pulled tight by a long, greasy ponytail that descended down her back in a thick rope like a bell-pull. "What a fucking deludinoid," muttered Ann Marie Tubb, as her friend shot him a cold glance. "Don't wait underwater, OK?" said The Krauthammer. Most of her was head, like a goosefish, and most of that was mouth. Ann Marie Tubb testily bellowed, "Jumbo shrimp!" Warholic the editor with an angrily wagging nose was meanwhile shouting in the midst of a fringe of lackeys at the bar. It was the *Quink* crowd, ignoring all of the State Streeters. "Speaking of oxymorons," one of the sapphics groaned, nudging her friend. Eyestones, who had just come into the bar, stood in with various of his acquaintances from the journal. "Watch out, Varwick is holding court," said Mr. Fattomale, who wrote the television column, and with his thumb motioned sideways at Varwick. "'Women have been dominated by men because down through history they have been smaller,' he claims. I disagree, so I'm a shadrool?"

"It's true, it's true," said Varwick, who said everything twice. Mr. Fattomale, whose odd haircut resembled bad topiary, snorted down his nose. He was tall and his cheeks were runneled like a gnocchi board, while one tooth jutted from his lower jaw. His complexion resembled a draftsman's architectural symbol for rubble. "Since when does size alone mean bullying? It's the mind, not the body, that bullies. Chrissakes, get a hold of yourself." They dug into the argument with sharper knives, wet with drinks and sharpened on the whetstone of hard opinions. Paul Ratnaster, who did major interviews for *Quink*, muttered apropos of nothing, "It is neither the mind nor the body but the condition of the world that claws and torments the inner lives of the poor bastards who inhabit it." Ratnaster's pitted face had the trodden, swarthy, unhealthy hue of depleted ground, the color of mud, the very earth he condemned. The pupil of his left eye was turning gray with an early cataract. Superb in the delirium of his constant indignation, he found virtually every human passion odious and made the condemnation of them his study. A policy of good cheer was, to him, a repudiation of

feeling. His intellect was rigid and black. "I fully believe and can actually prove that there is in one's own consciousness a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness. *Anyone* you know is ultimately awful. I was raised in schools by demented nuns who taught us that evil in the human soul, however audacious, is powerless to oppose the eternal law of final good in the moral universe. I heard no commentary from the dear penguins on Isaiah 53:10." He quoted, "'Jehovah himself took delight in crushing him; he made him sick.' '*Law of final good*,' did they say? How touching! A compassionate and tender God, did they say? Who takes pleasure *in tormenting the innocent?* In condemning us with doubt and in silence? In crippling us with uncertainty? With horror? With death? What about the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18) in which, because some ungrateful for capitalistic blowpipe greedily demanding from some poor slob the hundred denarii owed him—what, twenty bucks?—turns him over to jailers to be tortured, Christ turns and threatens us with, 'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart'? Where were the nuns to explain *that* to us hyperquizzical morons?" Ratnaster appeared literally to be boiling with fury, standing there in his bent shoes. His outraged face seemed even darker from late nights and raw drinks, and he was saying terrible things out of the corner of his mouth. But nobody cared. Nobody listened. Nobody could look at him. Almost everybody had his back turned to him, a fact that only inflamed Ratnaster more. "What a lie! I heap them! I scorn them! Look at this drainage swale! This fishpit! This valley of tears! What sin have any of us committed to be born? What crime that we have come to exist? What fault that we should be brutalized? You know who I blame—I blame God."

"I, I, I, I," said Gnorm bitterly. He was cross-eyed and round-eyed and while he felt self-conscious about both had no kindness to give away himself.

"For a prophet, the only grammatical person is the first person," sneered Ratnaster.

What Ratnaster did not like, he hated. If there were two things he hated, one was man, the other was God. He was a betrayed man who, needing adversaries to lean against to feel the heat, considered forgiveness a weakness and detente a defect. The one person he could manage to hold in high regard was Eugene Eyestones, who once had given him money when he was in duress. Much of his anarchy paraphrased a

deep anger long burning in him for having once written a masterpiece of novel, later published to high acclaim, that had been notoriously mishandled for years by several perfectly stupid literary agents, trollops of Gothic ignorance, and then a series of bird-witted editors and various trumpeting drudges wasting his time who actually belonged to the sub-zoology of fat men, a category Ratnaster vehemently despised. Ratnaster's eyes were atrociously and atrabiliously black, flat, and hard—they never seemed to blink—and he had a visible deformity. His right hand, which hung with no movement, was the most direct source of his misanthropy, at least so everybody suspected. There was no living appendage there. He had been born without a right hand. It was as if his viperlike malignity, drastically evident, could be visually traced as a prop to the menacing-looking black glove covering the primitive prosthetic device in its stead, a coil-hard spring between the artificial thumb and forefinger that snapped to action like some arcane and menacing weapon summoned at any time to do his bidding. Ratnaster was a heavy smoker—it was the expenses of a lung operation Eyestones helped him to defray—and always held a cigarette with the burning end straight up, pinching the fag end of the weed like a penalty, as if, maliciously, less to hold than inflict it.

Larry Clucker, the *Quink* janitor, then came into Welfare's to give the door-keys to Ann Marie Tubb. His overcoat was dingy brown with one button dangling, and he was wearing heavy rubbers. A weird elongated creature with a whitewall haircut who had the big head as well as hands and fat thighs of the acromegalic, he was an uninhibited cross-dresser suffering from Gender Identity Disorder who constantly appeared in frocks. He was a germaphobe as well and often carried in public, and sometimes wore, hideous pairs of transparent latex hair-coloring gloves to avoid stains and to keep from getting defiled. His eyes were so cretinously close together that he could have worn a monocle. The cheap inter-sex colognes he wore, which could have kept flies off a dead carp, often prompted rude and sarcastic smooching sounds from his fellow workers who called him Cherie and Gladiola and Pillow Biter, which yet never prevented him—a caliber of ignorance is to ignore—from standing in with the group. An oddball void of any identifiable universe, he revolved about the office trancelike and was morbidly a friend to nobody on earth except to pathetic Abe, that intractable stuttering son—he was over twenty but acted like an eight-year-old—of the two generally loathed managing editors of the magazine, Judith and Jim

San Diego, who could always be found futzing around the office doing nobody quite knew what.

"Size always mattered to me," sibilated R. Bangs Chasuble, the movie critic who made poodle paws, odd in someone overweight.

"Out of envy?" asked Gnorm, sardonically.

"He's got an acorn," grumped Ann Marie Tubb.

The Krauthammer agreed. "A bathplug."

"Remember the dictum," said Discknickers, turning to wink at everyone and nudging Spalatin, "that humor only makes us laugh when we are prepared for a large perception but arrive at a small one? Herbert Spencer, I believe."

"'In the name of Jehovah I will cut them off,'" put in Ratnaster, whose animadversion was as much against the world as against Chasuble. "Psalm 118."

"I was referring to the concept," said Chasuble, looking hurt. "China is far more easily managed than Paraguay, all right? Read Edmund Burke's *On the Sublime*." He was bald, sweaty, and unprepossessing, for his beady eyes, narrow and reptilian, were pressed together like tiny beans by the force of his squeezing cheeks and fatness of face. A fashion maven nevertheless, he was wearing skewbald shoes and a natty ascot. Everything of which he was not the contemporary he discounted. He had the curious penchant for developing passionate crushes on young men in paintings, the latest being Henri Fantin-Latour's *Portrait of Arthur Rimbaud* with his delicate left hand meditatively touching his cheek that Chasuble had recently seen in the Thaw Collection. He was the proud owner of a white dog, a poodle, whom he cherished, two cats at home, and a proud collection of Lalique.

"Oh balls! Just cause you have a big body like an Australian seal," declared Mutrux, the lawyer. Something of a homophobe for having lived for years in San Francisco, Mutrux was thin and tall with the pulled snout of a steelhead trout. An odd toothy grimace with which he sought to outface people revealed the curious dentition of an off-center midline of dental numbers eight and nine that gave him the look, by way of his teeth, of a house with a badly placed front door. Nor was his nose exactly in the center of his face, which added to that. "I've seen more fat variations of that type in Twinkietown, aka 'The City by the Bay,' than you can imagine," he said. "Weirdies, beardies, fairies, and queeries." A scary trait of his, a physiological oddity, was that he almost never blinked, a fact that gave him in any face-to-face conversation

a stubborn, dug-in, combative air, imparting to any communicant of his—not without the frisson of confronting a machine—a distinct unease and even collapsing vigor. He constantly logged people's mistakes, which vivified him, and his laborious and dogged manner proved that the crudest malice is perpetrated by those who take things seriously.

"I have my mother's thighs," said Chasuble defensively.

"And tits."

"We're all off-kilter, friend," moued the movie critic, popping a nut from a bowl. "Did you know that three-fourths of all men have penises that hang to the left when in repose? That's why the extra material that covers the fly is always located on the left side of the trousers."

Spalatin gave out with a coyote howl.

"'In Napoliiii, where looooove is gay,'" sang Gnorm sarcastically, intoning with typical malice the opening line of "That's Amore" while everyone began wagging limp wrists and laughing. Chasuble, as he often did in stressful moments, began fitfully walking about and flicking his fingers into the air like Struwwelpeter.

"I like your jacket, jacket," said Varwick to Chasuble. He poured himself another beer. A silly little fellow with unkempt mouse-colored hair, BB eyes, and not much chin, Varwick—who tended to run around like a squirrel, in jerks—also had that odd, push-lipped, butterfish, doofus face of Harpo Marx making a raspberrry. He looked thistleiverous, with hair worn in an ugly mullet that was bereft of definable contour except for a spate of spiky whorls that seemed to spin like pinwheels out of the center of his head.

"It's Ipanema suede ornamental leather in camel," said Chasuble, carefully pinching a microscopic piece of lint from the shoulder. "My poodle is shedding," he baby-talked nose-wise into the limp but absent dog's spent fur, nuzzling it affectionately, "aren't you, Dippy?"

"You a leather-daddy, Chasuble?"

"You better thtop calling him that," said Gnorm, flapping a fussy hand.

"Thonthabitcheth," said Discknickers, smirking.

"If you went to a mind-reader," a wistful Chasuble declared, turning to Gnorm, "he'd charge you half price."

Gnorm jerked his thumb to Chasuble. "He thinks a squeeze bunt is when you press your cheeks and fart."

Ratnaster, surveying them all at a distance, laughed with cruelly timed hocks.

"'Because,'" sang Mutrux, sarcastically intoning a Fifties song, "'you come to me with naught save loo-ooove....'"

"Did you hear what that shabby excuse for a human, Gnorm, just said to me?" asked Chasuble, moving over to Eyestones.

"Divisiveness is us," said Eyestones, shaking his head.

" And folks just let it slide? We've all gone to the dark side, friend. It is the worst outrage since Ida Lupino got top-billing over Bogart in *High Sierra.*"

Gnorm, who hated Chasuble said, "What do you call a faggot in a chariot?" He paused for an answer, then deblaterated, "Ben-Him!" "Why don't you make a noise like a hoop and roll away?" snapped Chasuble. Larry Clucker, taking umbrage at a remark he thought aimed at him, swung his frock clear—a rare example of haste in him—and drifted out the door along with his odd dolichocephalic shadow. "Did you see that thing in the dress?" asked Discknickers. "That's not a dress, it's a retaining wall," said Ratnaster. Varwick turned to Mr. Fattomale. "So you have to have to call me a museum boob, a museum boob?" "But you called me a shadrool," complained Mr. Fattomale, whose facial tics due to a ten-year addiction to Ritalin began to kick in. He knocked back half a beer and mournfully wiped a nose that resembled a textured condom. He sputtered. Like a sperm whale, he had no teeth in his upper jaw, which badly affected his pronunciation. "Don't offend Petruchio," quipped Discknickers who despised Mr. Fattomale and because of his yellowish skin often called him Mr. Orzo which looks like rice but is really pasta, "I w-wonder why someone doesn't go over to Humpy and B-Bumpy there, the Q-Queens of the Zipper Fly, and t-talk to them," Spalatin said. He indicated the two large female grunts with faces like Algerian justice smoking and drinking in big grenade-patterned shell-black coats in one of the side booths in the bar. "I would myself if El Humpo there didn't scare me so," piped up Chasuble, shoggling his buttocks and trying to fit in. "I swear, she looks like that Nazi pipewipe Rudolf Hess—beetle-browed, glum, lantern-jawed. With all that precarious mental jitteriness? Ouch!" he groaned. "And talk about braying! I haven't heard a female voice like that with its echo of Fifties trash since attending a Jan Sterling Film Festival in Soho years ago! Have you seen *Mystery Street*?"

"But you'd rather have a buddy board anyway, right?" asked Gnorm, the office layabout who, along with a whistling *s*, had ugly robin's eyes rimmed in white and half-asleep-looking. He nudged Spalatin. "Not

Oooga or Booga, right?"

Ann Marie Tubb, who leaning forward revealed a widow's hump, began toying with her shepherd's pie. "This is fucking fish-food," she said in her ground-glass baritone, sticking a fork in it. "Throw it at the chef," declared The Krauthammer, adjusting her hair like a whip. The Krauthammer edited the poetry section of the magazine and almost by ritual refused to accept any work that was submitted by males, coldly approving and printing only spiky, knife-sharp verses by peevish and polemical women promoting sisterhood, ridiculing men, and satirizing normal family life, her preference being those hard punk tranches electric with postmodern snideness and ill-concealed anger. She lit a cigarette and coughed out phlegm with a wheezy laugh. "I have globophobia," she said, "looking at all these simon-simpletons." "Wanna thumbscrew them?" asked Ann Marie Tubb, who blew out smoke and quipped, "Let's call Big Nigel Eigl. She'll duckpop their fat asses."

They neither of them liked Eyestones's column, not only because he had once inadvertently gone into the ethnic nature of the lack of sexual passion in the Irish race, a huge majority in Boston with their political hucksters and red-faced blowers-of-trumpets, among which mustachioed Ann Marie Tubb could be numbered—he was airing a new theory of his, simply as a way for readers to think about it, between the libido and latitude and longitude on the world map—but mainly because of the shocking piece he had written a few months earlier and that had became widely and nefariously known as the "Biology Column," or, as it was referred to around the office, the "Clits Have No Wits" piece. The Sexual Intellectual, in trying to solve the problems of love, had badly blundered with them, not that he knew it, even though, and with mounting despair, he was becoming increasingly convinced as the years passed that something so multifarious as sex—like space, the sea, the brain, etc.—should never go under only one name. It was no clearer to Eyestones why he even kept this on the magazine, a metaphorical table, he told Duxbak, covered with imaginary crumbs. He explained, "The trouble is, complexity's unreductive, like—"

"Like himself."

"Who?"

"Minot Warholic, the Lord of the Manure," said handsome Discknickers, the magazine's accountant who wore Elvis aviators, impeccable shirts, and always sported a fat silver watch—a "Nuremberg egg"—in his vest pocket. It was a German thing. They referred to him

in the office as "*Der Schwarze Adler*." He looked especially sharp in his chalk-stripe suit, a blue two-button Ferovianti, and his expensive shoes. He always seemed to be facing in profile like an Egyptian relief and moving about quickly in what looked like premeditated steps. He was flashy, always in control, carried nothing in his pockets—no wallet, no money, no keys, no cigarettes—as he did not want to ruin the line of his clothes, and was famous in the office for always fastidiously wearing Czeck & Speake's No. 88 cologne. The paradox of the fat watch? The sleek line of his clothes? That was Discknickers. The man confounded reason.

Discknickers was very good-looking, had a glacial personality, and a soft, stony, grayish-blue voice that rarely rose above a semi-whisper. He had finely-drawn temples and long, tapering fingers, clean and smooth, with manicured nails that shone as if polished daily. He was pale. Women who liked him, and often tried to make themselves available, made him grow heedless of them, although he was presently having a fling—one of many, mostly with wealthy but also lowly types—with a shapely and obliging young trollop by the name of Creedmore who waitressed over at Monsky's, a grim little diner crudely and unaffectionately nicknamed "Totaljew's" in the Allston area, a low-rent neighborhood where several people in the office lived. He felt entitled in everything he did. He insisted, for example, on always cutting into the front of any queue and always drove up and royally parked at the front door of any destination of his, whatever the regulation; the windshield of his car usually sported a blizzard of parking tickets in consequence. It was part of his paranoid defensiveness that, wherever he sat, he always had a wall behind him. He almost always stood with his hand in front of his crotch, like Hitler, and it was rumored that in spite of his sleekness he carried on his person, inside the bottom right leg of the expensive, elegant suits he wore—always bought one size too small so he would look trimmer, thus sacrificing comfort for display—a Yarborough long knife, the particular weapon presented to every graduate of the Special Forces Qualification School with a CPM S30V stainless steel blade hardened to a 55-57 RC nonreflective Gun Kote coating with a black canvas Micarta handle and fitted with a nylon sheath. It was his proud boast that he belonged to the National Alliance and subscribed to *Free Speech* and the *Empire*, among other fascist magazines, which reinforced the mad politics he was more than happy to transmit.

A man of paradoxes, Discknickers was extremely well-read in spite

of his having been raised a Jehovah's Witness, a demiurgical and questionable sect he explained—and snidely dismissed—as conceiving of Paradise as being a vast football stadium with 144,000 seats for which specific members alone held not only the tickets but the complacent and superior conviction that all others would be excluded. At the same time, he could defiantly quote chapter and verse of Scripture, and had more than a running knowledge of apologetics—reading the Bible, a compulsion of his, was a way of ruling others by fiat. His efficiency was cynicism, offered with light irony but endless traps of condescension, but then it was widely known, especially in the office, that on the subject of his mother he would hear nothing bad said against her. Nothing. A person of profound half-culture, acquainted with countless apocryphal sources and marginal theories and all the cranky tract-literature of various pathological fanaticisms, he had not so much lost the faith of his birth as developed a new and militant one, with allegiance to a reverse ideal: *hate faith*. A normal conversation with him was virtually impossible, for he was either impenetratingly taciturn, a mood more often than not accompanied by an icy and baleful stare, or stubbornly raging on in loud, interminable rants and monologues punctuated with an irresponsible laugh that was little more than an expression of outright scorn and utter contempt. In his spare hours, he would listen to and could grow teary over the military and wartime speeches of General Douglas MacArthur—he went out and bought the full collection on 78 rpm records—most of which he had memorized. He was, notoriously, a full-blown anti-Semite, unapologetically blaming the Jews for virtually all the ills in America and all the ships at sea. He nudged Spalatin and gestured toward Warholic. "I always hear him before I see him. And smell him before I hear him. Cheap? Tight as a duck's rectum! I keep my job here mainly to get the money I love to see him have to spend."

"I love your s-sense of humor," sputtered Spalatin, a snipe-nosed, stuttering reporter with sharp features and an exceedingly wide mouth who, something of an acolyte, greatly admired Discknickers and eagerly listened to him at every opportunity.

The *Quink* contingent was frankly less a group than a gathering. It was not a constellation. No stars existed. There could be found here neither warmth nor light or for that matter any close relationships. In that way, Eyestones often reflected, it was very much like the universe. There is no such thing as a "constellation" in any real sense. Various

stars in any particular group are not associated with each other, he knew, but merely happen to lie in more or less the same direction as seen from our planet.

"Was that shot aimed at me?" asked Mr. Fattomale, turning toward the bar and nudging Ratnaster, who despised the editor more than anybody who worked at *Quink*. "Oh Christ, and here he comes," groused Discknickers under his breath, employing, among others, the lampoon name satirical Germans once used for Hermann Göring, "*Der Dicke*!" He sipped his drink. "Uncle Jumbo! The Unholy Profit! The Shah-in-Shah!" He watched the reflection of his boss in the bar mirror balancing a beer and with a cruel smile, smacking his thick lips, worming his way across the room to join them. "The Balloonatic," pitched in Gnorm, twirling a knob of his hair, which was a dark matted red straw. "We call him the 'P-pig, right, Discknickers?" said Spalatin. "For obvious reasons, first of all. But for the P & G you w-wag him about, Procter & Gamble products, your pet p-peeve, I believe, aren't I right, Eyestones?"

"It's only one of them," said Eugene Eyestones, who repudiated that particular company for experimenting with animals. It was no secret at *Quink*, however, that he disdained almost all authority—cops, captains, corporate fat cats fomenting their strategies—and suspected that any and all exercise of it perverted, all submission to it humiliated.

"I'm still amazed that the dude lives with two strippers," said Varwick, "two strippers." Mr. Fattomale nodded. "They dance at the Purple Cucumber. Muskrat and Squishy. I've seen them both. Talk about VD on the hoof! Skanks! Even ranker than that ex-wife of his, queen of the rhino-midden. They wear vampire teeth and dance in black gauze masks and hiss like indigo snakes." Just hearing that reference to Warholic's ex-wife who had become dependent on him made Eyestones, sipping a malt liquor, close his eyes and take refuge as an alternative in the secluded arbor of his heart where he watched his bakery girl, Rapunzel. He decided for his own peace of mind that he would speak to her next week and simply tell her just how he felt. Meanwhile, Welfare's was filling up with the usual pile of office workers, wage slaves, underfunctionaries, nopsters, tech-heads, analysts, filing clerks, scriveners, micro-morons, and no end of pretty secretaries from the business section of downtown Boston.

"Enjoy," said Spalatin, raising a glass.

"I loathe Yiddishisms," said Discknickers with total disgust. "*Kvetch.*

Oy veh. Meshugenah. Nudnick. Tsimmis. Umglick. Verkochte. Hi *Bubeleh!* What *tsures*! With the *spritzing* and the *sittling* and the *nadling* and the *schmelling* and all that horseshit. But what's the one Hebrew word they never use? I'll tell you: *tsdoke*! Charity! They abhor the word." He swirled his drink. "I particularly hate hortatory Yiddishisms. God bless! Nosh! Enjoy!" He glared at Spalatin. "If you want my friendship, avoid using them in my company, or is that too hard to understand?"

Ducking down, Gnorm all of a sudden loudly moaned to Discknickers, who looked up to see an approaching figure and sardonically quoted, "'Shut the doors, shut the windows, shut everything! Here comes the Invisible Man!'" It was Little Bob Merkle, white mouse and office uniformitarian, who at every chance he got took anything for free, stole things, and was even now boosting a fistful of multicolored plastic cocktail-stirrers that he thought he could sell later at a flea market. A skinflint, he would never waste a motion not to his direct benefit and even held inexplicable grudges, for at the office it had not gone unobserved that had refused to be in the same room with Larry Clucker, whose exit like some solar/lunar reciprocation usually precipitated Little Bob Merkle's appearance. He was heartless in his conniving need to keep solvent, constantly walking around outside with his head down searching the ground for lost coins, a nickel or a dime, or anything that might come his way. He cheated and lied and was envious but basically frightened of life. He had small sharp incisors and pointed ears like yucca leaves and a weak handshake, warm and obsequious and moist as a used bowling shoe. A colorless nonentity, he looked drained or packed in ice, with that coiffure of his puffy-white and hairbursts coming out of his ears like the paper frills on a roast. It was widely asserted that he had one less layer of skin than anyone else. His pink cheeks puffed in rather than out, and when his mouth opened only tiny words emerged. He came forth, looking around, and asked, "Where are the pretzels?"

Bevel-cut mirrors along the side walls reflected lights, and the beer-filled glasses, catching the late afternoon sunshine, put a bit of joy in the burgeoning smoke and noise. A telephone booth stood in a corner along with a large piano. A few bowls of pretzels were placed on the bar, and the first fist in was of course Little Bob Merkle's who wiffed them with celerity and said, "I love the architecture of a pretzel." "Plus they're free," said Gnorm, glowering at his overweight nemesis, "right?" "I have a collection of zoomorphic cocktail shakers," interposed Cha-

suble, indifferent to the provoking voice. Warholic bellied up to the bar and cruelly asked, "Think of them as your children, do you?" Gnorm, cross-eyed, always goading Chasuble, immediately megaphoned his hands and hooted at him with his whistling *s*, "*Not* intended as a spouse substitute!"

"Bum-partners!"

"Want a cavity search, Chasuble?"

"Love ya, mean it, gotta go," said Chasuble, nose in the air, and flounced out of the bar.

Warholic declared, "'The middle age of buggers is not to be contemplated without horror,' said Virginia Woolf. And I couldn't agree more."

Within seconds, Varwick yanked out his wallet to buy his boss a drink. "Want a rye? Want a rye?" With dogfighting shoves and a car-alarm for a voice, Warholic loudly accepted but quickly reimbursed Varwick, paying out the exact coins from sheer niggardliness—"Let's keep it even! Let's keep it even!"—for in his wiliness he knew very well that by incurring the slightest debt for the little bit of money lent him, he could be logically hit later by the same luckless deadbeats not only for that sum but a good deal more. It constantly perplexed those who knew of his legendary tightfistedness, when seeing him press nickels and dimes into the hands of anyone who had ever bought or given him something, to have to contend with what all of sudden seemed a major display of fairness. It always worked, however, for he could pretend in the very act that he was being magnanimous. "He's not different than all those Jewish talk-show crones on radio and rabid, exploiting pseudopsychics on television with their brain-guns filled with blanks," said Discknickers, "who, pretending to help, warn, or counsel the poor slobs who tune in to them prove in the end quite openly to be shaking them down like highwaymen!"

"Here's to money," said Warholic, farting. "Lots of it. Long and green."

"Swallowrific," toasted Mr. Fattomale.

"Gulpalicious!" said Varwick. "Gulpalicious!"

Warholic snatched up his glass, sucked up his beer in one big foam explosion like an expandible wahoo that can drink twice its weight, shot his cuffs, wheezed, and said, "Off to the *pishteppel*!" On his way to the toilet, the fat editor squishy in his spongy shoes went noticeably roundabout the far wall in order to raise a big foot to kick the Bechstein

piano, to which he proceeded to give a sharp boot.

Gnorm, a newcomer to the magazine—his oval face resembled a lemon, tipped at the chin with a nipple—paused a moment to ask Mutrux why the editor, coming and going, always went out of his way to register that blow.

"I thought you knew. Warholic is a Jew and the Bechstein family supported Hitler," said Discknickers, mockingly walking on his points and laughing. His face was handsome but bony and paste-white, severe—long and planar—and his right cheek and nostril occasionally quivered involuntarily. "Warholic hates Germans, of course. He's one of those cheapjacks who still goes in for all that old biblical shit about blowing shofars and the Midianites and tribulations and smiting the enemy. He can't get over World War II. I'm told he likes to watch Holocaust films backwards, so he can see Jews jumping backwards out of the pits. I don't know why he doesn't see that the Huns have been reorganizing all over again in the iniquitous Judeo-Nazism of bullying Israel, the midden heap of the Middle East."

"Bigot."

Discknickers burst into laughter and imitated a shtetl voice. "A Jew buying a hat asks the vendor, 'How much?' 'Can't you read?' asks the vendor, pointing to the tag. The Jew grabs the hat and says, 'The tag says 12. You say 12 and you mean 10. If it's worth 8 and I'll give you 6, will you take 4? Here's 2!'"

"Racist."

At the *Quink* office, prejudice was everywhere. A favorite Chinese restaurant was called "Won Dum Fuk's," "Jap City" was the term for Chidorigafuchi's, a local take-out place, and needless to say no fault or failure or unfortunate feature of anyone at work went unnoticed. They mocked Mr. Fattomale when it was found out his first name was Petruchio. They ridiculed Judith San Diego for her homeliness as "Queen of the Buzzard Cult." They heaped scorn on Chasuble for being light in the loafers and Ann Marie Tubb and The Krauthammer for their sapphonic dispositions. They satirized Duxbak for being short. They lampooned Eyestones for showing compassion for the editor's unprepossessing ex-wife. And Discknickers, who led the anti-Semitic faction against Warholic when it came to the general game of hating the editor, went so far as to celebrate every March 13th, the anniversary of Hitler's having annexed Austria in 1938 and renaming it Österreich, as well as the restrictive Johnson Immigration Act of 1920—who but he

could possibly remember such legislation?—which cut off the flow to the United States of Yiddish-speaking immigrants.

After viciously kicking the piano again on the way back—Warholic walked in a fat, ponderous way, plantigrade, on the full soles of his entire feet, like a bear—he went directly over to Eyestones to speak to him.

"I was just telling the San Diegos over here"—Warholic leaned in with a gimlet eye and with gesturing thumb bitterly referred to the three sour, Weimaraner-faced creatures back at the bar, Jim, Judith, and Abe—"that, despite the major shit-storm you got us into with that sexist essay of yours, I'm still not going to fire you." The controversy, which became even more notorious than the series of AIDS pieces he wrote, soon reached television, local and national networks, talk shows, everywhere. "The stock market walked off a cliff last week. Did a brodie. Lost me a fucking packet. I'll still be generous to you, *versteh*?" He shouted for another drink. The bar was filled with chain-smoking barflies and the vile deintoxicating root-vegetable odors of Irish cuisine, that ultimate oxymoron. "Thank you, Mickey. But maybe you *should* fire me," said Eugene, who knew his boss thrived on the city-wide attention and the spate of letters that the controversial piece had generated. "No, no, no, I'll keep you. And why?" He grabbed his beer, snorfled down mouthfuls, and wiped his upper lip on his sleeve. "Because you got brains. Brains is good, OK? And in this fucking organization here, trust me, we need all the help we can get, except from," Warholic brayed, looking over at Discknickers and adding loudly with the crude, ethnomethodological bias he was known for, "*except from Ahmad.* You get me? The towel-headed Aaaa-rabs!"

"I wrote what I believed," said Eyestones.

"And so you should have, Mr. Styptic," put in Discknickers, employing a nickname for the office *raisonneur* used to stopping blood.

"Abe"—here Warholic tapped his temple with his index finger, as did everybody mentioning the name of Abe, who was also referred to in the office as None of the Above—"our Abe claims that you're a nutso worrywart," said Warholic, imitating fat Abe's squeaky voice, the sound of a gliss like someone rapidly wiping a mirror, for the poor hairy boy, to his parents' already profound personality burdens, was not only deficient in a hundred ways but frankly something of an undersized, cubby, endocrine dwarf with ears higher than his eyes, like a fox-bat. "Still, as I say, Jim and Judith want me to give you the boot."

Meanwhile, the husband and wife heard the editor and came over in high indignation.

"It's addition by subtraction," blurted chinless Jim San Diego, sticking his nose in.

"Shut up!" barked the short angry wife to her craven husband, the classic beta male, a subspecies of a man in servitude. It was famously in neuroacademic Cambridge that one encountered such couples. Judith was hard as cane, a rule-snoop rigid as a Galatian but without God's grace. Looking at her alone was to feel cold. She had the brainless eyes of a merganser, brutal black-going-on-grey chopped hair like imbricated roofing tile, and a mouth that bore one of those perpetual twenty-past-eight grimaces that are so repulsive. Her odd duck-egg body with its preterimposterous dimensions fully defied her clothes to assume anything like recognizable form. "Don't even talk to him!" his wife snapped at Jim. "Go feed Holman!" He was their dog tied up outside, who was listening.

"Clasp me to you, delicatest machine," muttered Ratnaster to himself, smiling angrily at a window.

"*La Trou de Jaloux*," said Mutrux.

"The Duchess of Pleats," put in Discknickers, adjusting his necktie.

Out of breath, Spalatin suddenly ran in to the room, whispered something in Warholic's ear. Warholic cursed and banged down his glass of beer. "Calling pest control! Calling pest control! I should have known. The enemy is at the gates. Chicken Legs—*drek ahf a shpendel*!—is spotted in the area. I'm being pursued again by the Blowpipe! The Town Pump! The Cum Dumpster! I'll kill the bitch."

The editor peevishly scuttled to the front window of Welfare's, hunching forward and scanning the street for a sign of his ex-wife, Laura. "Talk about acid reflux!" Everybody knew what he was up against. A madwoman with a grievance bearing his very own name had been snooping him down through the streets of Cambridge and Boston every chance she got now like some kind of bloodhound, which was among the kindest names he called her. As Warholic stood there, he tripped through a litany of barnyard animals that he dubbed with sexual epithets by way of cursing her name. Spalatin said, "I saw her the other day in Central Square walking by Tom Flurkey's Turkeys and, I swear to God, honestly thought she was one of them! With a b-beak."

"Like a penis sheath," added Gnorm, punching him. Everybody screeched with laughter.

"The skinny is she's bonking a cripple."

"I've seen him. He looks like a shoplifting Cuban with a gun in his armpit, you know, with a reptile's eyes and this, this club foot—he limps!"

"It's better than doing a spade, isn't it? Like that grinning, cocky-looking jungle bunny with the gold caps on his teeth you see slopin' around out front. You know, Speedo, Farina, the Duke of Earl," said Gnorm, revolving his arms like a soul singer. "Booker T. Hambone. 'Hey bitch, whassup. Where yo' at? Lemme have a bit of somethin'.' He was the first person I saw when I first moved to Boston. I never saw such a cocky coon."

"That cue-ball perpetually drunk on forty-rod whiskey?"

"And always grinning. With teeth broken and upended like a D-flat dim7 chord diagram," offered Spalatin who played the guitar.

"Agent Double-0-Soul," laughed Discknickers. "Name's Jamm the Wesort. I've talked to the dude. A little pimp. He's always looking for women. White women. Hangs around Kendall Square. Or over by the trains. Sunshine Sammy. A nig-nog with a bulldog-flat face. Got this strriiiiiide. Wears a porkpie hat. Ever see him without a lid? His hair comb's so complicated you forget he has a forehead."

"Nobody bonks cripples," said Mr. Fattomale. "Do they?"

Everybody turned to look at Eyestones.

"Ameliotatists," he said, "is a term for people with a sexual fixation on amputees."

He had heard the gossip before. Still, he was crestfallen. *Was it possible? Laura had even been sleeping with her landlord, Micepockets?*

"It's amazing how you manage to compile all of these out-of-the-way facts and figures, Eyestones. I heard you know everything about Marilyn Monroe, too. So, where was she born exactly and how tall was she?"

"Los Angeles. Five-feet-five and a half," interposed Discknickers, who shared Eyestones' interest in her.

"And?"

"What?"

"Give us more."

Eyestones knew they were trying to take the mickey out of him, but it didn't matter. Knowledge was noble in every instance, and he shared

it.

"Her Social Security number was 535-32-0764," he said. "Her jewelry box combination was always 5-5-5. She loved champagne. Her favorite color was beige. Goya was her favorite painter. She disliked pastries, the smell of garlic—on humans, not food—director George Cukor, and people she generally referred to as 'users.' She particularly disliked olives. She loved red roses, blue delphiniums, steak, caviar, and one song above all others: 'I've Got a Crush on You.' She once slept with the Satanist Anton LaVey. I could go on, if you're interested. She was a Gemini with Leo rising and Pluto in Cancer, often listened to Albinoni, loved Abraham Lincoln, passionately wanted to play the role of Grushenka in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and was entombed at death in her favorite green Pucci dress. She once told actress Jeannie Carmen that she had given birth to a baby girl when she was twenty but had no idea what became of the child. She used the pseudonym 'Marjorie Stengel' above her doorbell at 882 North Doheny Drive. I see in her the doomed and tragic history of the United States, a nation whose citizens are guilty of innocence, people who, having been given the brightest shining and most majestic land on the face of the earth, have long ago lost the dream. I have heard that Marilyn Monroe enjoyed violin music. She liked willow trees. Strangely, she never learned to swim, for all of the many beach photos taken of her. She always referred to herself as one of life's misfits but for the most part treated people with kindness, which I would like to do. She was myopic. I can't see any better myself."

"She was a poor trapped animal."

"I'm no connoisseur on zoos," shouted Warholic, nudging Varwick on the back and nodding toward the two women in the far booth, Ann Marie Tubb and The Krauthammer, whom they all knew and disliked. "But let's face it. About three-quarters of the human race, as we know it, look like animals. Right? I know I'm right. You're goddamned right I'm right. And you know why?" Came a pause. "Go ahead. Ask me why."

Gnorm asked, "Why?"

Warholic said, "Because it's me talking."

V
Rocking-Horse Nostrils

Eugene Eyestones mainly kept his distance from Minot ("Mickey") Warholic, finding him less mendacious than cruel and a pluperfect phony. Warholic—his father, a paperhanger from Romania, had changed the name from Vercholeryeh—in lashing out revealed a wide, dark mouth with a tongue and mouth-lining almost as black as a crow's. In his outbawling impatience, he had the robotomoronic habit when talking of not only refusing to listen but of not being willing or even able to hear another person's questions or opinions, his insistent monologue just driving right on with a cretin's fixed insistence. It was almost always a speech no one could enter, as he spoke right over you insistently like mad chattering teeth. He refused to let anyone else look good or outdo him and in the matter of any conversation always angled it around to himself. "You fucking *narodnick!*" he always barked at Eyestones for whatever patience he had shown his ex-wife in her unhappy isolation whenever she came by the office, and he always went stabbing his cigar for emphasis in the direction of anyone he abused, which was in fact just about everybody.

It was Warholic's gross unattractiveness that people always remembered. Eating was a major hobbyhorse of his, and he approached food with what virtually constituted a dementia. He resembled in size and menace that gigantic bullying vulgarian actor Mack Swain ("Ambrose") from the Keystone Kops silent films with his black mustache and jelly

belly who was always punching the lights out of smaller, weaker men. A kind of self-defeating recognition drew out of him a primal impulse to envy and low-rate everybody in his employ. But one figure stood out among all others. "I got heartburn from the money lawyers are costing me to get back at that bitch," he said of his ex-wife, his prime target, and grabbing a fistful of beer nuts he shouted for another beer. He was huge and soft-looking with big thumbs like paddles, and as he drank the alcohol was heating his big sloping head, the pink scalp of which, wrapped over with a few last odd straps of hair, gleamed like a newborn gerbil. Was it anger or those huge rocking-horse nostrils, each shaped so differently, in that weird toilet-shaped head that had given to him that almost subhuman brontosonic nasality?

A vague, urinous scent clung to him like skunk, and when he got excited or angry he tended to spit like a crass vinegaroon. He smoked long black cigars with a kind of voluptuous joy. Putting things into his mouth had become something of a displacement activity for other things missing in his life. Rumor had it he suffered in the bedroom from Brewer's Droop, although no one in the office could ever prove or disprove the fact. "It's my theory that he keeps sluts around him as a ruse," Ratnaster once told Eyestones. "I've heard that any virility he might have had disappeared sometime around his mid-twenties, no doubt with an increasing vileness connected to his ambition. You know? First one begins suffering from medomalacophobia, the fear of losing your erection during intercourse, then he becomes sterile. My best guess is that his sex-life is asmotic, the subliminal fallout from his resentment of women in general. Hey, but you're the sex expert." Warholic's fatness, a sort of crude gigantism, led to many scenes. One night at the Hotel de Dream while drinking, Mutrux in a brazen moment of drunkenness told him to lose weight. "So I'm a moose. I should care?" asked Warholic. His batwing tie was askew, his gabardine suit wrinkled. "Exercising doesn't work for me. I checked." With the curiosity of the unlearned, Warholic was filled with the kind of facts nosed out of a lifetime of boisterous butting-in, wily recollection, and plain unabashed nosiness. "I exercise, my body begins burning fat, which smells like bacon, so I get hungry and start eating all over again!" Everybody laughed. "Bacon?" asked Discknickers, sarcastically arching an eyebrow. A silence fell. "Are you baiting me?" grizzled Warholic, who wore his rancor in his neck. "I hate your smug ass, but you make money for me, OK? You're one lucky bastard."

Warholic loved wrapping himself in buzz. "Get me Ratnaster!" he would bellow. "Call Mutrux! Where is that *putz*? Muskrat, bring me some coffee!" He was full of advice, bold with observation, loud with claims, and noisy with self-assertion, playacting continuously in order to reinforce his own idea of himself. He welcomed the existence of weakness in others, which he not only relished but cruelly translated to his own dramatic use, after barging into restaurants, for example, when he was unhappy and shouting at any face he knew. He boasted he could sleep with any woman alive. A compulsion for chasing women—"Tell him you've gone shopping," he always slyly proposed to married women when suggesting a tryst—was rooted in something deeply pathological, as was his habit of shoving people and howling at strippers and farting and exploding with crass Yiddishisms like *Shmohawk!* and *Chei kuck!* and *Zolst es shtipin!* In his egotism, Warholic reminded Eugene Eyestones of his own brother, Marysas. In his eyes, it was the worst thing he could say of anyone.

There were many rumors that Warholic's boasts of virility were a mask, particularly when after someone once passed around a caricature of the editor kneeling dwarf-like before the tower of a gigantic phallus with a bold caption underneath taken from Psalm 92 stating, "My horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of a unicorn"—Discknickers who knew the Bible well was suspected of being the culprit—it was thought to be the truth only because for a period after Warholic saw it he become soft, limp, and unthreatening.

A would-be writer, Warholic for his failures and insufficiencies generally used his thud and blunder to try to intimidate people and to cow them. Any and all listeners, who were forced to become part of his presence, were also expected to keep quiet. Now he was talking again, the bullying one-way speaker nobody could ever interrupt, holding forth on the one subject that lately exercised him more than any other, his ex-wife, Laura Warholic née Shqumb—he always self-abusedly repeated the unanagrammatical name Shqumb like an evil curse—and the money that she was trying to extricate from him. No one's dislike approached the loathing that Minot Warholic felt for his ex-wife. Monsters do not mix; they were two of a kind, demon and vampire, zombie and witch, and in their warring hatred polluted each other. "*A broch*," he screamed, "I could kill the *yachneh*!" His face flared, magenta. "I never met her mother once in all the time I knew her but heard that the woman is a bug-eyed scow. Nor have I ever met her father but from

all she told me of that weasel he resembled in his screaming ineptitude and twinkery the father of a short, fat, lardassed former girlfriend of mine whose own shit-heel of a father, a pathetic low-echelon bank clerk on the island of Nantucket, was a ridiculous, overweening, self-absorbed nancy, more woman than man, easily the most selfish person I have ever known, the ultimate goy, who out of sheer whim married and divorced several women with whom he had families, then flatly walked away from them all, leaving them indigent, all the while with fussy fingers he would be ordering Eggs Benedict for himself at cafés every morning and throwing himself lavish birthday parties and living off wealthy widows on the island without so much as a care in the world. I have a word of advice: Never get in fights with ugly people. Do you want to know why? Because they have nothing to lose! Laura the Blowpipe has the face of a vulture and the voice of a grackle—throw a rock at her you can kill two birds with one stone!" He held out an index finger, which Varwick pulled and, hocking out a laugh, Warholic farted loudly. "She used to scissor her bush in front of me, the Vulva Puppet!"

The insulting mockery among the *Quink* workers was incessant. It was the opposite, thought Eyestones, of the craven and transparently sleazy way show-business folk all feign to know each other and converse upon meeting, even if strangers, as if they were all part of a club in which, nodding, smug, sickeningly complementary, all were superior to the average man. Here nothing held of warmth. Not even close to it.

"Women are all usurpers and make fools of us all," snarled Ratnaster, with his good hand bending the right arm with the black-gloved hand until it clicked. "I don't trust them and never have. Women! Gertrude, a whore, bore Hamlet out of wedlock. It's my theory that the Prince of Denmark could not kill Claudius because his uncle was in fact his real father. There are clues in Shakespeare only fools fail to follow. Look closely sometime, it was really Lady Macbeth who murders the king, not her husband. Shakespeare laid it all out for us. Ophelia is eventually buried in the grave of Yorick. Point?" He shrugged. "Clowns are always killed by the cuckoo. What do you want from me?"

Warholic even in San Francisco had the habit of cultivating literary people of both sexes with an almost morbid intellectual vanity, people of whom his ex-wife was jealous, as Eyestones heard it, for both before and during their marriage he rarely introduced her to anyone or for that matter even walked out with her in public; in fact he kept her in the dark about most things in his life. It was only after their divorce

that, coming to Boston, he had started the magazine with his mother's money as much to secure a tax shelter as to turn a penny, although it had taken a few years for the enterprise to do anything. His mother, eager to be rid of him, had provided funds for the magazine both to get him out of her life and on the express condition that he never again return to California. He was almost biointelligently cagey about money in all instances. He had moved into a large flat on Beacon Hill and was living in concubinage with two strippers from the Combat Zone—"arm candy" he called them—not only because it threatened and infuriated his ex-wife, but also to save cash. After Laura moved east from San Francisco into a shoebox-sized flat in Newburyport, Massachusetts, to stay with her own divorced mother, they could not get along and were continually out of sorts. Mrs. Shqumb eventually kicked her daughter out. Laura, who had no job, merely walked around town or watched television by day and slept on a small sofa at night until her mother, an emotionally damaged woman herself who used all kinds of tranquilizing drugs after angrily booting Laura out, ultimately decamped to the hinterlands of Newfoundland with a bigamist realtor from New Hampshire who, after having had a stroke and finding himself disabled, cagily took on that poor late-middle-aged woman, fat and failed and futureless, less as a companion for himself than as an unpaid maid and full-time indentured servant. It was fish or cut bait for her feckless daughter. So what happened? Laura then went and took a room in Cambridge.

Vindictive, small-minded, and crude, Warholic was perfectly happy to retail for the entire office every last detail of his life with her. "It always goes with desperation and low self-esteem in a woman, Eyestones, doesn't it? Sex excesses?" asked the *Quink* editor. "Adultery, golden showers, circle jerks, shrimping. You name it, she's done it." He thalassucked his beer. "Mosh-groping, that too." Varwick kept bobbing up with: "What's 'shrimping'? What's 'shrimping'?" Mutrux with a secret smile helpfully supplied, "The sexual act of sucking someone's toes. I heard that back in San Francisco she once earned ten bucks by getting pied by some sex-fiend on Castro Street. Oh," and elbowing Gnorm he asked, "and what about that night right down here at Houlihan's?" "Right," said Gnorm. "She was sitting on a bar-stool eating peanuts and talking to some dude with python cowboy boots over in Quincy Market and both of them compiling synonyms for the male erection. 'Stiffy,' 'hard-on,' 'beer can'—her favorite, she screamed." Discknick-

ers laughed out loud and said, "I saw her double-fisting drinks in the Middle East with some guy on blow two nights ago."

All the while, Eugene Eyestones was pondering this paradox, that the beautiful Rothschild rose is virtually bereft of scent and so what did that indicate about beauty.

"'Pied'? What's that? What'd you mean 'pied'?" queried Varwick, peering forward with a slack expression and scratching that unfortunate Glenn Ford haircut of his that made him look like a Chia Pet or a Monchichi. But nobody was paying any attention to him.

Meanwhile, Ann Marie Tubb and The Krauthammer, ignoring this intellectual give-and-take, were taking delight in admiring each other's hands, Tubb's being hefty as a mechanic's and her friend's something along the lines of beaver paws. Quoted Tubb,

> "'License my roving hands, and let them go,
> Before, behind, between, above, below.'

"John Donne." The Krauthammer momentarily looked vexed. "I don't read men poets."

Shouting for another drink, Warholic leaned forward with a leer and confided to everyone, "Back in San Francisco when I met Laura in the Mission District, she was living in a catbox and working in a law-office cubicle this big answering telephones, and it was she who introduced *me* to watching performance acts: old bald guys drinking glasses of urine, trapeze artists sucking their own dicks, a masochist named Bob Flanagan, one of her favorites, who cut his bologna in two or something! You know? I mean even women, rolling in peanut butter or Jell-O or aerogel and doing unnatural things with rubber toys! But could I go close to watch? The wacko bitch even back then was pathologically jealous of every woman she saw." It was true, thought Eyestones, he had seen it himself. Forget logical reasons. Laura Warholic could develop an intense hatred for a woman within mere seconds for doing nothing more than carrying a Dooney & Bourke handbag or sporting a Lands' End rugby shirt or flashing a Clio jacket or wearing a Movado watch. Sleek, well-groomed women she particularly loathed. Unfortunately for her, they were a common sight in downtown Cambridge.

"You weren't bored with her?" asked Ratnaster.

"*No*," said Warholic, shrugging. "Anything plus zero is itself, right? You can do the math. Still, she got in the way. Lying, sneaking around."

He looked coldly at Mutrux. "Bagpiping one guy on Friday and on Saturday running around waving her long-haired arms in wild pursuit of another." Warholic took a drink. "She has had several abortions. What a fucking buffalo! And guess what? She even wanted to be a nude model—exactly what does a nude model do, model *cellophane*?—and even once concocted a scheme of selling her soiled panties through the mail to deviants! She is one scary bitch. You think any of this got better when she moved to Boston?"

"It got worse," said Mutrux. "I heard she sleeps with spades."

"One spade," said Spalatin.

"I know the nigger," said Gnorm.

"A loud door-poppin' shuckster from downtown spadeville."

Mutrux interposed, "Jamm, they call him."

"'I loves hypno. I drinks white liquors, like Grey Goose, see? Buy me a bo'! Fa shizzle my nizzle, momma, and I'll do the shiznit!'" mocked Gnorm.

Spalatin nudged him, laughing into his cupped hand. "'Whatever I gots to do to get my Nikes, my Adidas, my riiiide to get my rims, so's I can drank my Cristal, seewumsayin'? I run my bitches and hos for yo'!"

"I thought they liked ghetto booty? She's thin as a Saltine."

"I've heard"—Warholic looked surreptitiously around to make sure no one was listening—"that in typical nutter fashion she once actually slashed a painting in the Museum of Fine Arts."

"That's sexual?"

"Beats me."

"Ask Eyestones."

"The Man with the Faraway Eyes."

Depressed by all the gang-tackling savagery and calumny, Eugene, farsighted, a student of large-scale patterns, a man who was only amazed that a woman, any woman, any woman on earth, would have married Warholic—could it be true, as he'd read, that women fall in love with the place and marry the man?—preferred to stay out of it. He wanted only to be free of this whole story and to go home. No wonder, he thought, that Voltaire believed that marriage was the only adventure open to the cowardly.

"Out with it."

"He doesn't want to be uncharitable," said Mutrux, tapping his nose and composing a limerick on the spot sang,

"*There was a young man named Eugene*
who refused anyone to demean
but then how vilify
with blindness eye
a soul you can't see in the scene?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Something."

"Anything," said Varwick. "Anything."

Eyestones shrugged. "Kleptomania is a sex crime," he said. "So is arson. And gambling. Or so Dostoevsky feared, overcome by that compulsion when between 1862 and 1866 he was chasing young Polina Suslova around Wiesbaden and Baden-Baden in the grip of that obsessive affair. Was it an aspect of his impotence?" He took off his glasses and with a handkerchief rubbed his thick scratchproof acrylic bifocals. "You could make the case, I suppose. I haven't heard anything sexual about slashing paintings, but it's intriguing to wonder."

After some judicious thought, Little Bob Merkle, silent for some minutes, earnestly piped up to ask, "*Would* there be customers for soiled panties?"

"Oh shut up, Merkle!"

"If assholes could fly," said Ann Marie Tubb, "this place would be an airport."

Little Bob Merkle was hated throughout the *Quink* office. A sutler, shameless and shrewd, he was along with that white popcorn hair of his rinsed to such a pale, insipid shade that his face and hair and clothing all ran into each other. He once banked $20,000 in public donations by claiming in a scam that he had a daughter suffering from ovarian cancer, having put up signs and posters in stores, and was sentenced to a year at Norfolk for the felony. Along with the bruised fruit and dented cans that he always bought, he would also pick apples on Sundays in the country, ask for inflated sales slips, and what fruit he could not resell he would, on another day, to another clerk, return for refunds. He supposedly resold pumpkins that he bought cheap at Haymarket Square and in a lot off Porter Square that he rented for a month every December flogged Christmas trees bought by the truckload for underprices up in Goose Rocks, Maine. He often stole Jimmy Fund canisters. At the office, no one hesitated to spread rumors, which were then reca-

pitulated in later discussions and gossip by way of intervening minds, creating ever new reports. Most of the stories were true.

"You with your soiled panties," spat Ratnaster, turning to Little Bob Merkle, "are an ugly pawn too large for your infinitesimal perceptions, because of course there are customers for everything, and *we* are the customers owned by way of investments and power by six or seven world organizations, all cunning, covert, and corrupt: the Bilderberg Group, the Business Roundtable, the International Monetary Fund, the Council on Foreign Relations, the World Bank, of course, which is propped up by the U.S. Treasury, and how about the totally corrupt U.S. Farm Bureau, which is more interested in Wall Street than any small hardworking American farmer?

"The International Jewish Congress," put in Discknickers, folding his arms.

"*Es fangt shayn on, vaiter*?" asked Warholic, glowering at Discknickers. "Don't give me that lollipop of a face, Schutzstaffel. You know what I'm saying. You going to start up with all of your shit and shinola again?"

"I'd also throw in the League of Women Vultures," added Ratnaster, gulping his drink. "Hey, and don't forget the Bohemian Club, which in its secretive and weaselly way has enough financial power to snake half the known world and then some." He sneered. "You ignorant bastards haven't got a clue."

"I have a clue," said Warholic. "And a crime and a creep, as well, OK? When I get through with my ex-wife, they're going to find only her skull, feet, and palms of her hand, like that ten-cent whore Jezebel's who was eaten by scavenger dogs."

"That's biblical," said Varwick, "isn't it, chief? That's biblical."

Discknickers raised his glass to mutter, "Here's to the Bechsteins."

Among all the calumnies, Eyestones never failed to be struck at how Laura was the subject of so much contempt. The fact of the matter was, however, that, except for the slashing, all the rumors had eventually proved true. It was generally understood of course that Laura Warholic did owe her husband money, as she owed others, but it was in being ignored, or as she saw it deserted, that had made her so vindictive, and she had apparently gone so far as to have written not only to all her ex-husband's former girlfriends with all sorts of accusations and neurotic demands—"papering the street," they called it—but even written angry, unhinged letters to Warholic's mother, who lived somewhere in

Santa Barbara. It became part of the general malaise at work, in fact, that Warholic, for all his awfulness, had a legitimate grievance. Laura Warholic, who was never shy, although she claimed to be, with damaging competitiveness and morose nihilism repeatedly came by the office, making scenes, drifting in and out of everyone's life like a lunatic Dulle Griet, whom she frankly resembled, a formidable shrew, armored with gall, insanely brandishing a sword in her left hand and stealing with her right, stumping along goggle-eyed and straggly-haired through a red night like Pieter Brueghel's raging inferno with her pointed nose, long scrawny neck, thin cadaverous body, and mouth gaping wildly open, one crazed hip higher than the other. Whereas she often refused to say no to certain dark forces within her that pressed her to disappear, another streak in her was devotedly self-defeating. She was obstreperous, a scold often walnut-hard and portentous as the transforming night. She was covetous out of a deep need. It was the avarice of sloth. There were other paradoxes. While Laura Warholic commonly dyed her hair magenta and sported blue fingernails, still people ignored her. There was every reason to believe another rumor, one that no one contested, that she had spent time in an asylum.

It also seemed she was dependent on everybody. She squandered allegiances.

"It isn't only that she is a slacker and a total skull case—I mean, a person who's nuts, capable of pulling an Edvard Munch at the drop of hat—she's also a fucking deadbeat. Empty as a hole. Mistress Beggarbowl. The mind fairly wilts at the approach of work," Warholic chimed in, shaking his jowls. "A hanger-on. A retainer. Useless. Constantly in need of support like—like Christ."

"What did you say?"

"You talk about subharmonious thievery in the food department? *Try your own Jesus*!"

Discknickers said, "You doctrineless pig!"

"Christ was a *sponge*!" deblaterated fat Warholic, angrily leering, his face going heavy, with folds, like a bull's scrotum. He aimed a cold eye. "He was a fucking mendicant! A pet! A leech! A deadbeat! He was always walking around inveighing against ill-gotten riches and corruption by way of private property, but what did the guy ever do to pay his own way?" Inflamed with revenge, Warholic was ready to launch. Emotion made him impolite, and his bigoted fury prepared. A fierce thorn impaling him gave him unappeasable anger, a black, annihilating

hatred of Christianity that allowed him the change he relished acutely to deliver the darts he would.

"Of the million subjects available to Christ, his second favorite to discuss, after the Kingdom of God—it is scripturally proven—was cash," barked the detracting editor. "Long green. The ol' do-re-mi. Spondulicks. *Money*! But, tell me, did he ever have any money on him? They had to bring the damned fool a denarius—Matthew 22:14—to make that obvious point about Caesar and God. He owned nothing. He borrowed everything. You people turn this into a virtue? He cadged. He wheedled. He bullied. It was not his own stable at birth. It was not his cross at death. The tomb he was buried in was not even his own. Live free or die, the good old New Hampshire state motto, right?"

Warholic was under full steam. Having been bested in such arguments before, he had done his homework, and it was bring it on.

"He was always hungry. Ever notice? He spitefully withered a fig tree for bearing no fruit just when he petulantly wanted something to eat (Matthew 21:19). Don't go trying to make me look like Mickey the Dunce. We learned all this crap seated at long wooden tables from *Horev* to *Yavneh*—Jew school to you jamokes, OK?—under the knuckle-knocking zaddiks in *shul*. What, you don't think we know our enemy? 'Where's the grub? Where's the grub?' he complained, starved for food when leaving Bethany, and then frustrated, spitefully took it out on that tree. 'May no one ever eat from you again!' he cursed, blasting the tree with the prosecution of a poison finger. The very day before that, not twelve hours before, spitting in fury because of an empty stomach, he barged into the holy temple on his big feet and furiously punted over all the tables. That's not food rage? That's not a glaring example of hunger-spite? This scavenger is your messiah, Discknickers? Your savior? Mr. Big? He defended David's right to go barging into the house of God and blasphemously wolf down shewbread. The apostles and disciples themselves were always starving. The poor ignorant fools were driven like ravenous giraffes to have to snatch and munch handfuls of wheat in the fields, crumblestumble they had to glom from the fucking yarrowstalks through which they walked (Matthew 12:1-2)! Check your own bibles! Face it, Christ was the ultimate parasite and invitee. A dinner dog! He attended huge sumptuous banquets at a certain Levi's wearing costly apparel and gulping from flasks of date spirits and eating fig cakes, herbed cheese, and salted meat with rich, overindulged tax-collectors—Luke 5:29—but with a visible weakness for social

climbing and parvenuism was constantly queening it at long groaning tables with pompous and wealthy snobs *every* chance he got! It was if he were born to the manor. Disgusting! Take a look sometime at that famous painting *Feast in the House of Levi* by Paolo Veronese which depicts exactly what I'm talking about where you can see this so-called ascetic of yours with perfumed hair all *farputst* and sporting exquisite silks and sitting center-stage in an expensive marbled atrium in the company of a whole passel of performing buffoons, noshers, red-nosed drunkards, upstart coons, pimp hustlers, fawning hangers-on, and a zooful of malignant dwarves without so much as a hint of anything spiritual. No elevated ideals at all. Scatheful! Devouring! Rude!

"On the cross itself he was still whining—'*I am thirsty*!' Get me a Fresca! Why even after he dies, it is duly recorded by the four fabulists that he suddenly appears like Banquo's ghost, pale as paper, and what's the very first request from this universal bailiff of poverty and toiling in the vineyard? Exactly. 'Do you have anything to eat (Luke 24:41)? Will you tell me something, does a dead man have an appetite? Hunger pains? Belly cramps? 'Bring me some of the fish you have just caught,' he demands as if he had just sat down to table (John 21:10). Once again it is back to food, strapping on the feedbag, banging his tin cup up and down for a waiter. And so what happens? They throw the goldbricker a boiled fish! I told you, we had to memorize all this shit in *yeshivots*, twice a day. Christ then proceeds to tell the apostles or the epistles or whatever they were, 'Come and have breakfast,' John 21:12 in the godbook, if you're interested. He tears into a hank of bread, then wolfs down a haddock or two. This is, what, an hour or two after he has been just *raised from the dead*? Unearthed from the dark tomb, folks, trailing his filthy graveclothes behind like a mud-mummy? *Had he even a stomach*?"

Indignant, Discknickers struggled to go after him, but Spalatin grabbed the accountant and said, "No point, he's on a roll."

"Tell me, who paid for all of Christ's lodgings? When he went roaming about the countryside with that circus troupe of his, all of those performing monkeys, wandering through Galilee, Caesarea, Sidon, Philippi, Carphanaum, and Bethpage, had the man a fucking shekel? Answer?" Warholic mockingly put an open hand to his ear. "I don't hear anything." He paused. "Had he a seashell?" He fake-looked up at the ceiling and hummed. "Cloudy with showers?" With a big grin, he stood back in triumph. "Don't all of you *mevshavs* look so shocked. Are

you afraid you'll be hit by lightning and barbecued? These are facts, not fictions. My old rabbi who knew from Christian ugly and scorn and never failed to warn me not to trust a smiling Gentile—he came from an impoverished little dorp in Russia called Motol where the uncircumcized putzes all treated him like donkeyballs—used to quote Proverbs 30:15: 'The leech has two daughters. "Give! Give!" they cry.' I know I'm correct in saying that the figure the reb had in mind was nobody but your greedy Middle Eastern carpenter!"

"Swine," shot Discknickers.

Warholic shoved his face forward. "This was not a chiseler, a mooch, a beggar, a *schnorrer* figuring how to live off other people?"

"Jewwolf!"

"Do you happen to remember how one day just roaming around the countryside he spies that rich little shitpad, Zacchaeus, and walking right up to the guy, buttonholes him with, 'I must stop at your house today' (Luke 19:5). What is this rubbish, *I must*? I must reach into your deep pockets and grab some cash, you gullible nudnicks? He brazenly walks—*walks*—into the houses of strangers and commandeers their rooms as if he fucking owned them (Mark 7:24-25)! *Drop what you're doin, bublik, I don't give a shit what, and wait on me*! What poor slob had to pay for the luxury of the Upper Room into which this bearded *nuchshlepper* walks with all of those stinking, illiterate fisherfolk for companions (Matthew 26:18)? He appropriated some perfect stranger's room for Passover the same way because that was his habit! Beggary! Who paid for the donkey on which he rode into Jerusalem? Clyde Beatty? Robert Ruark? Buffalo Bill? The Ringling Brothers? A delegation of suits from the Moose Club of Nazareth? He then proceeds to order some of his lackeys to go into town and snag a colt and a donkey—a donkey he royally insists, notice, that no one has ever ridden—giving these same obedient dumbbells by way of permission in taking these animals the lame excuse to pass on as an explanation, 'The Lord needs them.' The Lord—! The Lord, my ass! Hey, the Lord needs someone to settle my gas bill! The Lord needs someone to buy my lunch! How about to float my loans and to pay my taxes and to cover my mortgage? Why not simply come out and declare without the flannel, 'We, the Gestapo, take what we want'?

"He was always riding in someone's boat, ordering one of his pursuivants to pour him a cup of water, demanding that milling crowds be parted for him to walk through, insisting they throw their cloaks into

the roads, badgering someone to feed him, commanding someone to wash his feet or to fetch him this or that. These were just plain scams, out and out. I've often wondered whether research into the old police records of Jerusalem, if such still exist, would not reward the industrious investigator with proof that as a deadbeat Christ the check-kiter didn't spend some serious time in the clink, wearing cast-iron leg-chains for all of those pea-and-thimble tricks he pulled on the innocent and unsuspecting. Expensive oils and unguents were always being lavished on him (Matthew 26:7) which of course he assumed were his due. Had he and his family already been so badly spoiled by the Magi's extravagant offerings given him at birth which he felt were owed him and which his parents clearly cashed in in order to travel to Egypt? Had he no ethics? Nothing stopped the man. He kept it up day after day. All sorts of people were pissed off, of course. The Pharisees. The Essenes. The Roman authorities. Did that make him rein it in? Not a bit. The dude never quit. No, I can see nothing in his character to persuade me that any indignation a flout of his might arouse would have driven him from a place he did not want to leave. There were too many good pickings there! He turned his disciples and dogsbodies into beggars. Remember how he told all of them whenever they were setting out to bring nothing but scrip and staff?"

"You crucified him," scolded Discknickers, pointing a cold finger at Warholic and quoting, "'All the people answered'—mark you, *all* the people—'Let his blood be upon us and upon our children' (Matthew 27:25). All! The entire big-nosed, money-grubbing, hand-washing, black-hat-wearing, beady-eyed vole population of Sheenyville!"

"You goy prick!"

"All of the folk in Jewtown," sang Discknickers with dancing hips. "*Villejuif*!"

"Burn with my wife in hell!"

"You hate her so much?" asked Gnorm.

"I hate all scavengers," snarled Warholic, swallowing fury and glaring at his arrogant foe. "Once deception takes, there results religion."

Mutrux, turning to Gnorm, said, "You hate niggers and queers."

"Ex-wife, incidentally," Warholic said, his large nostrils flaring. "It's not enough I lived with her for five years in the City of the Chocolate Tunnel, I had to go and marry the bitch. I move to Boston. She moves to Boston. I start using e-mail. She starts using e-mail. I accuse her of owing me money. She turns on her toe to make

the same accusation. I use toothpicks. She *is* a toothpick. Years of this fuck-hobby behavior! Spark and Sparkle, right?" Snap! thought Eyestones. A husband is revealed by his wife, just as the health of a wife is revealed by her husband. A couple never marries beneath or above itself. "I once knew a hopelessly fat asshole from Los Angeles by the name of Levinger, one of those lying, cheating antiquarian book-dealers and first-edition hustlers who are no different to me than streetwalking whores or dumpster-divers, who gave me to believe that she even dogged him in the same way, and he was dumb as a burke and homely as ratshit with a belly out to here like Aiken Drum! No mandrill in the rain forest had an uglier puss than he! Is there no homeliness a harlot won't woo? I am told that she even had her first abortion after coupling with that double-bellied *fortz*. I smelled him on her like reek on corned beef. She stole money from me for it. And she owes me, what, $16,000! Snaked out of my mother. Pilfered from me. Borrowed? Niggled out surreptitiously in a thousand fashions the way Christ finagled his box-lunches! The *kirva*! I look at something like that, thin as an eel-spear, and wonder why I ever looked at that piece of scavenge in the first place. A woman bleeds and desquamates at set intervals, so tell me why should stealing be any different with them? I'm suing the lying, thieving *kushinyerkeh*! Taking her teeth out! Forget Mutrux. I'm hiring Brigalow and Mulga to sue her skinny ass, OK? Drag her down the legal road faster than a hoop on a hupmobile, and you can take that to the bank."

"Maybe she'll pay you," chimed in Spalatin. "Who knows. People change."

Love is all chance, like unlove, luck or ill luck, fate or unfate, free will or non-will, contrivance and the lack of contrivance, thought Eyestones as he listened to the words of angry Warholic, and he wondered who on earth could ever predict it, wistfully, dolefully, calling to mind the insightful if daunting words statistician Michael Kaplan once dolefully proclaimed, "Once you know that daisies usually have an odd number of petals, you can get anyone to love you."

"Change?"

"Isn't it possible?"

"Oh yuh," spat Warholic. "The same odds that a tornado sweeping through a junkyard could assemble a Boeing 747. He shifted his

shoulders, as his huge nostrils quivered in fury. "The *nafkeh* bitch refuses to get a decent job! Won't do bullfuck! You know what I told her, don't you?" an infuriated Warholic asked, stertoriously hooting through the room-smoke as he double-slammed the bar with fury and angrily threw a bowl of pretzels at the Bechstein, muttering, "Mechanical box of wires!" He swallowed. "I told her, 'If you want a helping hand, Chicken Legs, look at the end of your own fucking arm!'"

He looked at Mutrux. "You didn't like her. Why not"—he waggled quote fingers—"take her out?"

"Date her?"

Warholic shook his head. "Kill her."

"What?"

"Call it 'vista pruning.'"

"Great, great," honked Varwick with delight.

Mr. Fattomale said, "That's funny, Mickey. Where the deuce do you come up with 'em, Captain?"

"I'm losing my appetite," muttered Discknickers, slipping a cigarette from a silver case and licking the paper, running his tongue along it lengthwise, before Spalatin rushed to light it for him.

"You wet it?" asked Varwick. "You wet it? I've heard that doing so keeps the sediment from dropping into your throat."

"Speaking of Laura," said Mutrux.

"Please don't," said Discknickers, who had an extraordinary gift of mimicking the way people talked and a talent to amuse by doing accents—including glottal-stops and cleft-palates and stutterers—like pidgin, Chico Marx, first-generation Greek, southern Negro evangelist, angry Armenian, Mississippi planter, Jewish matron in Florida playing Mah-Jongg, Irish Pol, Indian tram conductor, Arkansas yokel, wizened Down East sea captain, a perfect Dog-American of Charlie Chan, as well as mechanical voices like the MTA subway overvoice at stops ("You are now entering South Station"), the robotic directive of an automated supermarket check-out ("Don't forget your change below the scanner"), that flat, super-condescending computerized telephone voice of corporations ("I'm sorry, I'm having trouble understanding you. Let me transfer you to an agent") along with all sorts of noises like cell-phone rings, ice-cream chimes, a repeating lawn-sprinkler, the *whoosh* of a ring-pulled beer can, even the squawks and grunts of various animals as well as birds and insects—and in a lilting Cockney voice

while pointing to Warholic broke into an English music-hall number:

"I don't want to get married
I'm having too much fun
I don't want to be bothered
With any single one."

Tracing steps, he faked a little buck-and-wing and mockingly poked his face in the direction of The Krauthammer.

"I'll stay single for their sake
And give the others an even break
What's the use of trifling
With my wife every night
When I can join the army
Anytime I want to fight?
No I . . ."

"Billy Murray. I'd say 1931 or 1932. RCA Victor label," said Eugene Eyestones, recognizing it. "A true classic."

"I guess so," said Mr. Fattomale, shrugging. "That's right, you collect records."

Discknickers asked, "And what do you collect, Mr. Orzo, backscratchers?"

"Another beer," shouted Ann Marie Tubb. A silence fell, followed by giggles. Bowing, Gnorm whispered, "*Mister* Tubb."

"In the railroad trousers."

"With 'post-office' shoes."

"You laughing too, Stilts?" asked The Krauthammer of Mr. Fattomale with disgust. She had the watery snuffle of a brooding hippo. Everybody in the office knew that one of the television critic's many quirks was his unique belief that all diseases actually came from the pavement, to guard against which Mr. Fattomale wore special gummy shoes with inch-thick soles and sole flanges that everyone at work always derisively referred to as "one-inch verandas." He never walked; he tottered.

"Bite me," said Mr. Fattomale, holding the final note of that nasty remark while that crocodilean tooth jutting from his jaw positively shone.

Exploding out of their chairs with shoving motions, Ann Marie Tubb and The Krauthammer both upended the table and walked out of Welfare's, shrieking.

"There's one thing worse than working for a woman," said Mutrux, grabbing his crotch. "That's working for a woman who wants to be a man."

"Lesbianism, curiously, is never mentioned in the Bible," said Eugene Eyestones, out of the blue.

"Maybe so back then," said Discknickers, smiling. "But libraries nowadays keep entire aisles stocked with Dy-Fi."

"'Die'?"

"Fi," said Discknickers. "Dyke fiction."

"Are women armies?" asked Spalatin. "Stormtroopers with masculine, no-bullshit walks? The K-Krauthammer. Ann Marie Tubb. That Laura person with her big radio-dish ears. What is it with these gunfighters?"

Ratnaster only stared.

"Speaking of which, has anyone seen that freak Curbstepper lately?"

"Or Laura?" asked Warholic, coming by.

Eyestones looked up. The editor had him fixed with a cold smile and thousand-yard stare. A good part of Warholic's hostility toward him was due to the temperate understanding that he had shown Laura, and, regarding others, in the office, Warholic was never above demonstrating a cruel "kill-the-chicken-to-show-the-monkey" policy toward anyone—whoever—inclined to do the same. Was something being said?

"I don't answer personal questions about myself or about other people, I'm sorry," said Eyestones.

"Flipping through the pages of the Boston telephone directory, I can't find the goober's name. Micepockets," quacked dutiful Varwick. "Micepockets."

"It's not listed, dumbo," shouted Warholic. "Plus the name's *Mijspickcets*"—which he spelled in the air with a wet index finger—"or somefreakingthing of a name like that from rural Albania or Estonia." And he turned directly to Eyestones to ask in a single fart-blast, "But you clock the bitch by the week, don't you, Eyestones?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

Eugene lowered his eyes. All knew that both knew each other. It would have been quite useless to protest, as Eugene never did anymore, although it had long been his devout wish that Laura Warholic simply disappear, anywhere, and never come back again, in spite of the fact that he worried about her. *I three times entreated the Lord that it might depart from me*, he reflected regarding Laura's presence while quoting Saint Paul on his affliction, the "thorn in the flesh"—a request, alas, that had not been granted. If the Pauline affliction of II Corinthians 12:7 was one of eyesight, as some insisted it was, Eyestones shared that, however. Having something of a strange and complicated nature himself, he had always been drawn toward poor creatures of single—simple—aims and purposes. Even at the office, they mockingly referred to him as Gladstone the Strumpet Saver, all except Duxbak, who, being neither a joiner nor a name-caller, was not among that group. Looking around at his fellow workers, Eyestones was convinced as usual that the tyranny of the majority was often more onerous than that of a despot. Confusion among them was always the same. And that is what *Quink* for him remained the symbol of: when many mice dig a hole, it is by definition always shallow.

At thirty-six, Laura was many years his junior, a homely, long-shanked, bony, spindle-nosed slattern of crucial need, low hopes, impoverished account, and undisguised but pathetic greed who had spent most of her years since college doing nothing but drifting and looking for a man to support her. For years going from one entry-level job to another, she spent most of the time working as a typing temp in a cube in local offices or living on unemployment-compensation since she got fired like clockwork from various jobs for sloth and indifference. She had no more logic to her life than a vixen in Vatican City. She once said to him, "I'm not relationship-suitable." It seemed to be even worse than that. She knew marginal people. A black guy called Jamm the Wesort who smelled game when he saw it would pass her in the street with his gold tooth and steakhouse strut—a sort of a gliding, no-abrupt head motion, and shoulder-roll—with "Wassup, dawg! Gettin' off wif yo' bad self?" or, if Laura happened to be walking with someone, "Frontin' on me, bitch?" Now it turned out that Micepockets, her crippled landlord and apparently a man crazily obsessed and in deep emotional turmoil, was reputedly having an affair with her and daily coming around to look for her, holding a dark grudge, halting about on that gimp leg of his through the crowded Boston streets at rush hour

when all the buildings let out—Laura had recently taken a job working as a lawyer's prat in the Washington Mall near the Quincy Market, answering telephones and typing. Micepockets often came around in various states of distress to press his desperate nose against the front window of the *Quink* office. Hadn't she also once had an affair with Mutrux, as people claimed? Was that why Mutrux often so knowingly stared at him? Eugene Eyestones didn't know, he couldn't say, he didn't really care, not anymore. No longer.

"I heard through the grapevine that you are in love," said Mutrux to Eyestones.

Turning, Eyestones stepped back. A nightmare he once had as a child of a hovering dark angel gave him a lifetime phobia of anyone standing behind him. It was not helped by his stint in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

"Really?" sneered wily Ratnaster, who loved to get inside anyone's decision cycle. "With Gumdrop Sal, the friendly Eskimo Queen? Or Mimi the College Widow who taught the boys anatomy? Or Flamin' Mamie, love scorcher and human torture? Or Minnie the Mermaid with her fishtail fanny? Or, what, sitting on a quay with some fluid slim-hipped Japanna with electric eyes? The wind zigzagging through the maritime pines? Or ripening on *amore contenta* with a willing *putana* in some ancient roofless theater in Taormina?" His eyes shadowed over as darkly he moved his dead hand with a click. "Spare me, please."

It was one afternoon a several years before that Eyestones out of pity, out of simple compassion, defended his very own ex-wife to Warholic, who had angrily brayed, "You want the bitch? Take her! You'd be doing me a favor! I recommend her onequarterheartedly to you! Get her out of my life and in thanks I'll do a fucking *kazatzka* in the middle of the Boston Common!" When Eugene thought of it all now, life blackened, and it was his sincerest prayer, and had long been, that she would come to her senses and immediately move away from the city of Boston, go anywhere, start again. Would that help? Would anything help? He wondered pessimistically. A person's not what he or she does so much as what he or she is about to do. Closing his eyes, he saw in his mind a landscape, a bleak nowherescape, an empty realm of depletion, dotted only with weird towers, caves, bells, flags, fires, big bowls filled with soldiers. Hell had a way of showing up in the strangest images.

'Don't you know about epithelial cords?" asked chiding Discknick-

ers with the assumed voice of surgeon. He jocularly nudged Eyestones and gave out with several coughs filled with professorial gravity. "Seminiferous tubes? Or the mesenchyme? How, for example, the graafian follicle comes into being in one sex, then in the other, from the same tissue, a transitory network in the mesovarium?" He loved mocking Eyestones's knowledge as well as his penchant at times for ponderous utterance. "The mesovarium in the female is, in the male fetus, the mesorchium see? Paroöphoron and organ of Giraldes; common Wolffian duct—and Müllerian duct, becoming Fallopian tubes, uterus, and vagina in the female, uterus masculinus in the male. So, endlessly, the anatomical parallel continues."

It was funny. Eyestones laughed.

Then he picked up his bag of groceries. "Are you going?" asked Warholic. "Home?"

"You're a hermit," said Gnorm.

"A recluse, try," put in Varwick. "A recluse."

My name is Sinuhe, physician to the Pharaohs, he who is alone, thought Eugene who had often heard Chasuble, his hand theatrically pressed to his heaving breast, quoting Edmund Purdom in *The Egyptian*, sarcastically twit him.

"The best of us, among which, let me add, I don't number myself, keep alone," said Eugene.

"Like?"

Eyestones laughed. "Try Jesus. He lived for thirty years, alone, without ever seeing his cousin, John the Baptist, who as a result was unable to recognize him at the water's edge of the Jordan when he came down from Galilee. It is an amazing example of isolation."

"You read too much," said Mr. Fattomale.

"No, you *think* too much about what you have already read," said Discknickers.

"And haven't learned," grumbled Warholic.

"Stick around. We'll buy you a drink."

"And who was it who said that every kind of reward constitutes a degradation of energy?"

Eyestones, shifting his bag, weirdly found that if regarding the world one had to be in it, he realized lately that he wanted less and less *of* it. He said nothing to the comedians. He could be very eloquent with silence and strike an adversary dumb simply by the way he would leave a room.

"Whaddya got in there, buns for the oven?" asked Varwick of Eyestones. "Buns?" He comically nudged Mr. Fattomale, who said, "Cooking?" "Anyone want to go to Wun Dum Fuk's for eggrolls?" "You cooking?" asked Discknickers. "They're better at Lump Sum's," said Gnorm. "I'd rather scarf a few b-bowls at M-Mrs. Buloni's Soups," said Spalatin. Leering, Warholic asked, "Want to catch the skin show at the Two O'Clock Lounge? It's Happy Hour." He chuckled fatly at his little joke, knowing Eyestones would not come. But the way of war is the way of deception. Warholic never took a step backward. He nosed up to Eyestones. His nostrils sharpened the feral look of his rocking-horse face, uncultivated, savage, bestial. "A girl in her scanties, and I'm talking wisps, does a magical soubresaut off a real donkey, striped like the ones in Tijuana. Stark naked. The girl, that is." Everybody laughed. "Not the donkey." Everybody laughed again.

Eyestones shook his head. "I have to get home."

"To whom?" asked Varwick. "To whom?"

Everybody laughed once more.

"To whom?"

But Eugene ended abruptly, in the middle, like Bach's *Art of the Fugue*.

VI
Eugene Eyestones

Eugene Eyestones was something of a recluse. He lived obscurely in an old walk-up on Windom Street on the Boston side of the Charles River where the river with its muddy current slogged along by stubbled fields and got dirtier. The old bulk of a house had been built way back in days when nobody thought of streets and was then ignored when somebody did. It was an area of drab old wooden three-deckers crowded into a neighborhood of low-income housing with punch windows. Several tall oaks in front of the old house by afternoon changed the glare of the sun into something like restful light. He was not settled. He was neither impecunious nor solvent, a situation that indirectly granted his fervent and ongoing wish not to be ruled by money or the lack of it. The sole companion in the two undistinguished rooms in which he lived—one extremely tiny, the other angular but of average size, with carpets real-estate beige and too many books—was an orange cat named Nook, a wall-eyed furball that was not very intelligent but calmly depended on him for love and food and warmth. Eyestones had lived with enough loss and disappointment to find that, with animals, there are no deceptions. It was a romantic sentiment, of course, a self-conscious and even solipsistic one, and that was his fault as much as his feature—he tended in adopting things to stand by them and exclude the outside world. Lately, he had gone off elaborate cooking. Once in a while, since he loved to cook, he would make an exception and spend

time in the kitchen conjuring up an exotic dinner. He lived frugally, eating one meal a day now, usually at home, invariably rice, noodles, or baked beans, the meals of those who live alone, only occasionally in cheap restaurants, supplanting his diet with green tea. Arriving home, he found a gift-bottle and note at his door.

He had learned to live in his own head. He tried to remain underground because he was incapable of accommodating the social requirements of success in others that he had not even achieved himself. He wanted to be in the world, not of it. Much of his life had been spent in flight from ownership, class-rot, and a life geared for and dependent on surfaces, and when he got mail his general attitude could be summed up, as he often laughingly quoted to Duxbak, by Henry Higgins's words in *My Fair Lady*: "Pay the bills and say no to the invitations."

He took off his coat, fed the cat, and watered his tiny red cactus with a turkey baster. The rooms were small and Rouault-dark. The flat seemed doomed that way, lying as it did northwest and southeast it lost both the morning and evening sun. It could get very cold there. In winter he used a portable Corona kerosene heater, which he filled every chilly morning with #1 white fuel and frugally kept it near him. In the heat and humidity of summer he sometimes slept up on the roof, which he called "The Chiang Mai Getaway." The austerity of his rooms, regarding furniture, verged on asceticism: a table, two chairs, and a bed. A back bedroom was where he worked when at home on an old typewriter. While making certain to lock and bolt his door this night, something he had never bothered to do before, he was struck by a new, more anxious side to himself that had emerged, for since the publication of his controversial article, which Warholic had insisted, before he left the bar, that they discuss on Sunday, he had been receiving a good deal of disturbing hate mail, almost all of it from Cambridge, mostly from illiterate anti-intellectuals and outraged feminists.

A small bronze golden Buddha that he had found in a deserted hut during the 1966 March battles with the 3rd Brigade in the Iron Triangle of Vietnam stood on an old oak 1901 icebox that, by installing a motor and regasketing the doors, he had converted into a working refrigerator. There was also a small *tankha* that hung on the wail, a Tibetan scroll-painting he had bought in Dharamsala. He owned two oils, one a portrait by Bill Allik and the other a genre painting by Rodion Tikhomirov that he could ill afford but had bought in Kiev, both of them works of young brilliant painters in their thirties who painted

faces like sinister viruses, grotesque, tormented, and desperate. A Yoruba mask with cowrie-shell eyes hanging over the inside door had been a gift from his brother, Marysas, a shifty lawyer who seriously insisted by way of exchange—his ploy was always to give in order to get—that Eugene surrender in return a rare Harper's Ferry rifle that he owned. His brother was a schemer, bald as a ruin, who with the thin neck of an old tortoise looked as if he wore his sins on the outside. He was stingy beyond words, had a concrete heart, and always wore the same tired clothes wherever he went. Whatever he saw he wanted, always conniving to shake a person down or screw him out of his goods or his land. Wealthy, he had the squirrelly habit of saving everything and in spite of his vast holdings once actually applied to receive Meals on Wheels, food platters commonly delivered to the aged, the house-bound, the indigent. He owned vast tracts of land in several states and three or four houses in which he lived, respectively, like a weevil in a biscuit with his third wife, a bizarre plate-faced drip who wore second-hand overalls and dead-women's shoes and, feigning insouciance, always contemptuously tried to show disregard for Eugene whenever she met him by saying—with feigned innocence—"Oh, you still live in Boston?"

A telephone had been installed behind Eyestones's deal bed, and after reading whenever he went to turn out the light by a nearby switch the receiver always fell on his head. Eyestones's rooms, like his own dense prose, suggested a point of view: diverse, adorned, amused, premeditated, filled with details, highly inclusive.

He spent his spare time mostly reading, writing, and listening to the old records he collected, often looking for them at local jumble sales and flea markets. Along the walls of his room were hundreds of 78 rpm records stacked on makeshift shelves, under which in a far corner stood an antique Columbia Grafonola in fairly good condition. There was a slatted wood console radio next to his bed. Piles of books stood everywhere, too many books, many of them packed away and stacked in cardboard boxes. His set of the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* sat on a shelf beside his bed, treasured volumes, crated, he had even taken to Vietnam. A snow globe that played the theme from *Carousel* that he brought back from Vietnam, a keepsake given to him, sat on a special shelf. Several large photographs hung on the wall of Dostoevsky's grave that he had once taken in the Alexander Nevsky Necropolis in Saint Petersburg. There was also on the wall a framed letter of Joe Hill's. Eyestones was pro-union and, although he had quit

the habit years ago, smoked Raleigh cigarettes all through the years in Southeast Asia. He had done a lot of traveling in the Sixties. A trip to and an extended stay in the Soviet Union in the late 60s had been a compromise for his initial but failed ambition, in his twenties when trying to extend his vision and realize dreams, of boldly trying to reach both the highest and lowest places on earth. He got to the Dead Sea, 1286 feet below sea level, the summer he turned nineteen. Seven years later, traveling to Mount Everest, he had managed to climb, with others, 12,540 of its 29,160 feet before becoming dangerously ill. He had always taken chances. Daringly, he once bungee-jumped out of a helicopter, a 900-foot fall. He had tried everything, including "zorbing," a hair-raising adventure in which you roll down a mountain inside a large, uncontrolled, free-racing ball, and even *skijoring* (Norwegian for "ski driving"), which involves putting on cross-country skis, hitching yourself by bungee-cord to a snowmobile—Norwegians used dogs, but he had drawn a line there—and flying down any suitable snow trail. He had climbed Mount Denali in Alaska and when he was eighteen years old swam the eighteen miles from Woods Hole to Nantucket. A violin hung on the wall. It was not an instrument he played much anymore, although he had gone to school for it, quite seriously, and had once even tried out with the Boston Symphony. He had auditioned well, playing Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen* and, with a Japanese friend, a duo for violin and cello by Kodály, but nothing ever came of it. On certain days, in certain moods, he would pick it up to play—one of Mendelssohn's sonatas, a piece by Boccherini or Debussy, a Schumann concerto, or long passages from Sibelius's *Violin Concerto*—but not very often.

Autonomy for him meant, among other things, being never singularly identified by a job, a talent, or a profession. He yearned to be never just one thing: not a peg for a coat, a slip for a boat, a can for a goat. We are multiples, in any case, he thought. He felt he was more than one person even having that thought, to notice another person having *that* thought, with an added him surprised at all three!

He ate early, loved his cat, wrote poems, baked bread occasionally, cared for a few perennials, and was always reading—anything and everything he could. He conceived of his rooms as something of a bolt-hole, a place where he could be alone and work. He could not tolerate crowds of any size or distinction. All groups are by definition morons, he felt. Did this prejudice come about as a result of the communal Sixties or a mistrust of his own family? It did not matter. The

force was always foul. He could sympathize with, even if he stood just short of sharing, a view of pianist Glenn Gould's, whose music and interpretations he loved, when he declared: "I detest audiences. Not in their individual segments but en masse. I detest audiences. I think they are the force of evil." He never went shopping. He set off for the post office to get his mail just after noon and left immediately to avoid to what he called "proximate conversation" with people, the kind of forced and idle chat insincere acquaintances engaged in merely by the act of bumping into one. It was what he disliked the several times he had gone to New York with Laura Warholic and on that long cross-country trip he had taken with her. Privacy is a secret. So is happiness. So *was* happiness.

Eugene saw few people. Duxbak, of course, his best friend, with whom once a week he met after work for Chinese food at the Ho Yuen Ting on Hudson Street in Boston. Discknickers he saw once in a while, mainly because he lived nearby. And of course he saw Laura no longer. A spinster named Kate, out of work and not healthy, he periodically saw when he would ask her to type a manuscript or two in order to provide her some income. There were other tenants. A fat Mr. Harootoot-oonian, who was built exactly like an emperor penguin, wore bright red suits all the time and enormous black service shoes—Eyestones called him *Le Rouge et le Noir*—and sold encyclopedias door to door. Another peculiar neighbor, Mickey ("Mouse") Mewlingshaw, who had a kind of disc-jockey's face and an unthinkably ugly mop of all-white hair, was a hack novelist who, with a view to winning the Nobel Prize—an award that he fully believed he had a chance to win—habitually sent out reams of his awful, undermedicated pages of fiction to famous writers all over the world after searching their addresses, as heatedly he worked overtime through various networking ploys to try to meet and befriend world celebrities like a fat and obsequious eunuch licking a caliph's toe-caps. "I once saw Picasso," he once told Eyestones in a fit of enthusiasm. "I met Graham Greene. I just wrote a long letter to Milan Kundera. He lives in Paris, you know, not Czechoslovakia, like a lot of people think. On a hunch, thinking he just might be willing to talk to me, I sat in a car outside of J. D. Salinger's house up in Cornish, New Hampshire, for about three days with my camera, munching bags of Fritos! And I can't tell you how many *years* I've been trying to get Marlon Brando's telephone number. On Tetiara, that private island of his? In the Pacific? Where he's holed up?"

Of the neighbors on either side of his building he only had glimpses, on one side a swarthy paranoid who with a grey pick-up truck and two yelping dogs always kept bright outside houselights, high-wattage flash-ons, burning all night (locals called his place "The Airport") and on the other side a short, swarthy, swaggering cretin with a flap of black hair, a full Jerry Colonna-like mustache, and three squealing kids, who always played his radio at full volume while running an illegal private business repairing vans out of his house in a street unzoned for it and snarling at his wife, "Twammy, get over here!" and "Twammy, get oudda here!"

The object that Eyestones found on his doorstep—a bottle of mauby—had been left there as a present for him by his closest neighbor, Harriet Trombone, a small, attractive twenty-nine-year-old woman, highly opinionated, who had been born in the Barbados but had came to the United States when she was eleven, after having been deserted by her mother when she was then left with an aunt, since dead. She was unschooled but brilliant. She made a point of not needing what she could not have, resourcefully declaring—proclaiming, in fact, as if by fiat as only Harriet could—that she did not need parents. Pride gave her strength. She burned sadness and apprehension like fuel to keep herself going, refusing welfare, rejecting special favors, and as to men who overlooked her and passed her by, one felt it was their loss. She lived alone in a downstairs flat out back. Although working as a temp at a perfume counter in Filene's on Washington Street, she was writing a book of her own, a memoir, observations on her experience growing up in the Caribbean and then spending time in this country. She was more than simply intelligent. She was one of those people with a 160 triple-plus IQ that for the force of its fire could burn down an entire building—and even claimed to have the raven's gift of perception. Eyestones had to smile. Apparently back on the islands the phrase "raven's knowledge" spoke of a hyper-oracular ability to see and to know everything! Back in Barbados, she had earlier attended the highly prestigious Alexander Girls School in Speightstown, but her originality was all her own and depended on nothing white America ever did for her. Harriet Trombone suffered not the slightest qualm about telling anyone, whether they wanted to hear or not, the way that the white man had taken advantage of minorities. Uncompromisingly frank and direct, she had a joking, forthright, and frankly loving but ironic relationship with her neighbor Eyestones, and having become a friend over the years—although she spoke constantly of wanting to

move to Canada or Australia—would pick up his mail if he was away, keep UPS packages for him until he got home, and when she had the time even cook all sorts of island dishes for him, but for no one else, like jawbone, coo coo, Danish girl, fishballs, sugar baby, dondislau, shingle cake, and boya and benye. He would in turn drive her shopping once in while. They enjoyed a teasing, flippant relationship with each other. She hated the government and the presumptuous and unabsolving servitude it exacted. Harriet Trombone's philosophy was simple: white people had stolen the Western hemisphere from peaceful native people *who for thousands of years were residents here,* stolen it outright like highway bandits, and should give it back immediately while at the same time removing themselves as soon as possible to go back to where they belonged and to stay there! She invariably met Eyestones by jerking her thumb toward Europe and muttering, "*An apology and an exit*!"

Eugene was not often lonely, but so much so at certain intervals that at times he thought if Nook did not come home at night he could not face the long darkness. Sometimes he called his cat H_2O, because *nuoc* also meant water in Vietnamese. Ever since he had returned from Southeast Asia, art had eclipsed life for him, in the sense that for years now reading and music had quite replaced anything social. The poetry he wrote he no longer sent out for publication, knowing that in this country published poets comprised a sort of club, a select group of interlocking friends and strategic shmoozers who visited writing colonies together and attended each other's lectures and took turns giving each other awards and always studiously and superstitiously reviewed and of course praised one another's books in order to insure that the same be done for them in turn. It mattered not. Eyestones wanted to avoid all communal obligations, for he had long known that the vice of wooing the world was the quickest method of losing your way. After a series of early reversals and rejections he remained secretive, tenacious, and self-directed. He had generally tried to live at the edge of the world, it was ironic, by way of both experience *and* antisocial withdrawal. In a very real sense, he was perhaps subconsciously protecting himself in the way he rarely went out. At times he could be extremely naïve. In a way, he was guilty of innocence.

After joining the Army at nineteen, going to Vietnam, and spending more than a year shunting mainly between Hue and Da Nang as part of the crew of Helicopter Squadron 163, Eyestones's UH-1 Huey crashed under heavy fire somewhere near the coastal route south from

Quangtri, known back then as the "highway of terror," a disaster oddly enough that was the result of an American assault with 70-mm. rockets, bullpups, and MK81 and MK83 bombs. A Vietcong with a .30 caliber shot him in the leg—this was near the town of Phong Dien—but Eyestones managed to escape and get treated in a nearby village. He had lost a ghastly amount of weight. He also lost his eyeglasses. Without his glasses, he felt hopeless. Almost instantly, the narrow world around him lacked color as it lacked depth. Nearly blind, he ran and hid for a month around the terraces of rice and patches of sweet potato with a thigh wound, raw feet, and fear for his life until finding safety.

He had never married. He had never sought to avoid it. He was impiously unencomiastic toward popular wisdom. He was not much moved to travel anymore. Did not Robert Louis Stevenson assert that the most beautiful adventures are *not* those we go to seek? Since he believed that the sole purpose of life for all of us was to figure out its meaning, he understood that if one amassed whole fortunes or raised huge families or achieved great success but failed in trying to do that, or failed even to *want* to do that—for surely wasn't even the attempt of it valuable?—one had wasted one's whole life. It was a source of true discouragement to him that most people, giving up their freedom to authority, terrified of its consequences, badly avoided wanting to *know* anything or profanely tried, as in Warholic's case, by inventing themselves to become their own creation. Knowing for Eyestones was pretty much hoping, a form of prayer. I am inexplicable, he thought, for the single heartbreaking reason that the whole world is that way in its essential condition.

He was constantly tempted with dreams of universal palingenesis, of being born again, usually in terms of escape and specifically by going up in a balloon. Wasn't flight man's deeper dream?

Eyestones quickly telephoned Harriet Trombone to thank her for her gift. "I figured it was time to do your sorry white ass a favor, white man," she replied in her strong Bajan accent, "that is, until we all wake up to take back this flippin' country and settle your honky hash!"

He always enjoyed their bits, which were almost like vaudeville. "Planning a revolution?" he added.

"Last time I checked, dahlin'. And, trust me, it ain't gonna be pretty. I'm personally gonna get Chinese on you. Know what the word *gun* means?"

After putting on a pot of water to boil, he cooked his rice noodles

and dined in silence. He cut a piece of pie and ate it, continental-style—strangely, obsessively—from back to point. It was a spare room. A moon-shaped icon of the Madonna, a gift of Duxbak's, tilted from one of the rough walls. Almost in counterpoint hung a photograph of the transfiguringly lovely Evelyn Nesbit, the "Girl on the Red Velvet Swing," vivid of beauty, long of hair, American ikon of sex and scandal, love and loss. It was his favorite time of the day, when, uninterrupted, he could play with his cat or swot up an article or pore over his collection of records: 78s, heavy and fragile as dinner plates. He knew them by label, number, genre, year. He had an assemblagist's imagination that covered more than records, for he had an encyclopedic knowledge of many unlikely subjects. Sex as a topic happened to be only one of them. He spent whole days happily vetting his records, separating cracked from intact ones, arranging them, cleaning them, matching covers—Bluebird covers with Bluebird records, Okeh covers with Okeh records, Decca covers with Decca records, etc.—one of the many pronounced fixations that had unpredictably increased in number coincident with the recent notoriety of that article. It was one of his quirks that he often went to sleep dreaming about a Model 1015 Bubbletop 1946-47 jukebox with its swirling spectrum of colors, which as an object of desire had recently become the second most important thing in his life, but no match for a certain someone who lately took the form of the pillow he hugged desperately close to him, going to sleep now like a safety-mast in a storm.

Rapunzel, who was more beautiful than one's most secret visions, seemed born of one's fondest, brightest hopes. She was loveliness itself, soft as a Lapland night, fragrance in a flower, a magazine advertisement for fashion with her elegance of arrowy grace and beautifully effaced strength. How she carried her head so high and looked straight ahead! Was he correct that she had long, delicate, piano-playing fingers or had he only dreamt it? But was all of it a dream? Was she an ideal whom he had created himself, a passion destined to fail, so that he could vault all the extremes of feeling and land in the pit of his imagination? Was the beloved distant, he wondered, or was distance itself the beloved? A large portion of Eyestones's waking life he spent daydreaming, and when not that it was its opposite, insomnia—or were they the same?—causing him to go wandering around half the night and into the wee hours of the haggard morning confronting his doppelgänger, who perversely refused him pity. He wanted to be loyal to

Rapunzel; for her, pure.

In his projections of what could be, he somehow connected the state of purity with clarity of vision and the possibility of attaining truth. Does not faith depend on purity? Consider the pride, the *vanity*, of carnality! According to Holy Scripture, it was simple humility above all that ennobled Jesus's "unlearned and ignorant" disciples (Acts 4:13) both to grasp and to apply spiritual truths that escaped those who were "wise and intellectual" (Luke 10:21, I Corinthians 1:26) but in a fleshly way. God chose the foolish things of this world that he might put to shame those that are wise. Upon rising every morning, Eyestones always eagerly placed on the phonograph Mozart's *Exultate Jubilate*. He once passionately confessed to Duxbak, "I love it so much, I can only listen to it when I am alone."

He selected a record and, snapping off the light, sat down in the crowding dark of his rooms to listen to the lyrics of an old recording of "You're the Kind of Girl That Men Forget" (Emerson 10657), closing his eyes as rosy-ebony streamers of the aurora borealis tingled up in his mind from the black horizon of the fall night, flooding his heart, as he prayed, "Please God, let her love me. If I have ever done anything wrong, help me now do right by giving her to me."

> You're the kind of girl that men forget,
> just the kind they enjoy for awhile,
> for when men settle down they only get
> an old-fashioned girl
> with an old fashioned smile . . .

A drag in the record slowed it down. He got up to put on the light to clear the needle. Drag. Rub. *Frottager*, he thought, *frottager*. A good idea for a column. Eugene Eyestones was always cataloguing, taking notes, filing ideas. Exactly what did a tropism for order indicate, he wondered? Was it an aspect of some dark, overalert, hyperobservant side of him that fed his antagonisms as much as it inspired his thought? Was it a reaction formation, some kind of defense, mounted to ward off the feeling that one is going to pieces? It was humiliating. He was haunted, he thought. He had become far too circumspect for his good health. At one point, he had begun looking into the mirror when he came home now to see how other people saw him. He was always deeply aware of a person's eyes. They let him feel strongly if what

they were talking about was worth pursuing a minute further. His eyes often hurt. He had been born with eye trouble but his condition had gotten worse on his military tour overseas. He felt driven to feel that he needed to see, to perceive, to *witness,* in order to know. Sometimes he even wore his eyeglasses to bed like Alphonse Daudet and slept the entire night through with them on. At other times, he would neurotically only drink from the front of a cup, instead of from the side as normal people do. He had other compulsions. When he was aware of it he refused to answer the telephone between rings, but only in the process of a ring, because he assumed people did not hang up in the middle of a ring. Not only did he compulsively play Mozart every morning, but he habitually went to the sink to let cold water run over his wrist to insure getting off to a fast start. In one manic period in the past, he had needed to have all the coat-hangers face in his closet in the same direction, like birds on a washwire. Things like that. He read his mail in the middle of the night. At the movies, still he always sat on the left side, rear; when backing up a car, he could not look left easily—could that have been the reason why he had so many dents in his car? At times he found that he had a strange obsession with counting. It also bothered him that people tended to strike matches away from themselves instead of toward themselves, that many rested and drained a wet umbrella on its handle instead of on its point, that they would crush their feet into shoes without a shoe-horn—all could ruin his afternoon. He could find it impossible to eat from a plate on a mat that was placed awry.

Who could ever put up with him? he wondered. Who would understand? Eyestones took off his eyeglasses and rubbed the lenses clean on his shirt. His glasses were weighty objects, a quarter of a pound or so, with quarter-inch lenses. Whenever he was enjoying himself he would characteristically rub his eyeglasses on his shirttail. When something made him sad, he would remove them and place his fingers over his eyes for comfort, cupping—"palming"—his closed eyes, for rest. When deprived of his glasses, he of course would bump into everything. Such unnatural fussifications! Not for such as Harriet Trombone! He envied women their easy beauty and their nurturing strength and their closeness to nature and their natural bond to the earth. It constantly forced him to question his own sense of place. The longer he lived, the more alienated he felt from his surroundings. He was deeply troubled by a persistent thought he had, in which veridical and delusive perceptions often shaded into one another, that our inhabiting a common

world was almost always inconsistent with the privacy of our individual experiences, with the idea slowly, eventually, becoming as bad as the thought.

After Vietnam, he needed to get a pair of black celluloid goggles ("Chinese glasses") that relied not on glass lenses but on pinhole openings in order to prevent staring and to force the eyes to exercise. Aldous Huxley had used such "straighteners" that forced the pupils to move stroboscopically and consequently prevent visual fixation for much of his own reading and writing in the early 1950s. Eyestones stowed in his room a black box. He kept them there. He for some reason needed—badly?—to know where they were. Even when speaking he detected in himself some kind of mad drive by having everything said, to have everything clarified. His voice when he felt like talking could be stutteringly rapid, as though seeking means to get out many sentences all at once. His friend Duxbak, who noticed such things, told him that at times of heightened feelings he spoke at a rate of seven thousand words per hour, which worked out to something like two words a second.

He was often compulsive in his positions. He required certain great distractions. Pinpointed interests. He referred to them as his "spells." During a period when he was smoking cigarettes he actually got addicted to grapefruit juice and became concerned that there would not be enough, not so much in his refrigerator, but in the country, in the world! A doctor helped him out of his fixation. At one point he drank nothing but ginger ale for two years. After reading Kleist, he became fascinated with puppets. But he had been greatly interested in puppets as a boy. It was his imagination that predominated all his life. Marionettes. Puppets. Games. Magic. He learned to make an egg stand on its end, to separate linked safety pins, to write in lemon juice for invisibility, to fashion paper "cootie-catchers," and to perform the inside-outside coin-and-hanky pass. The true investigation is the pursuit of Absolutes. He always took up new fascinations as if he had discovered them. For several years he immersed himself in Milton's poetry. Then came a "spell" of Napoleon. He watched birds and spent time working on a book of crows: Himalayan goraks, ravens, and so forth. Eyestones loved animals and neighbors could often see him in winter striding across the fresh snow with hot bags of popcorn for the birds. Over such obsessions he would lose himself. At one point he had begun to collect Marilyn Monroe memorabilia with the bizarre notion that anyone who did so would become close to her in heaven, something, for her

kindness and vulnerability, that intrigued him. Another spell, for no apparent reason, found him collecting Pad Thai recipes. And for ages he collected ice-cream scoops. All shapes and sizes. Studying Gregorian chant became a fascination, and Chinese food, learning to cook it, was another obsession. Did all of this begin when he had quit smoking years before? Were they merely displacement activities?

He jumped up, went over to the gramophone, lifted the arm, took out the needle, and shut off the machine. He opened one of the undercabinets where he kept several steel boxes of index cards, filed notes for his column. Acquiring and imparting information was for him an aspect of contemplation, a heuristic task, a therapeutic dialysis, emptying the mind and refilling it with facts, congeneric with dreams, which led to the buoyant and not necessarily baleful truth that nothing is final forever. He took out one of the boxes and randomly flipped through the cards until he came to the letter F.

***Face*: The human face is an erogenous zone. It communicates all, sees when it can't say, and vice-versa, smells, kisses, hears, feels, tastes, bites, frowns, gazes. ("He had beautiful eyes, which are always sad eyes," writes Susan Sontag—she is surely wrong—who once also expressed the belief that Walt Disney's *Fantasia* is a fascist art.) Among the most incontestably beautiful faces of women down through history, part of the divine lumen, have to be: Queen Nefertiti; Helen of Troy; the Virgin of Michelangelo's *Pietà*; DaVinci's Cecilia Gallerani; Simonetta Vespucci; Ingres's Odalisque; Filippo Lippi's Madonnas; Frederick Sandys's *Mary Magdalene*; Lady Cowper, the Countess Emily Mary, daughter of Lord Melbourne; John Singer Sargent's *Alice Vanderbilt Shepard*; Clara Barton of the Red Cross; Marie-Thérèse Walter; Evelyn Nesbit; Greta Garbo; Louise Brooks; Lillian Lorraine and Very Maxwell of Ziegfeld "Follies" fame; the mirific Princess Ozma of Oz; pilot Harriet Quimby; Lily Damita; Katharine Cornell; The Gibson Girl; Shirley Temple; Ann Sheridan; Joan Leslie; Rita Hayworth; Hans Memling's Maria Portinari; Grace Kelly; Catherine Deneuve; Claudia Cardinale; actress Jane Birkin; Angela Lindvall; Jean Shrimpton; model Laetitia Casta; Queen Noor of Jordan, Dorothy Dandridge, Julie Sexeny, Adriana Lima, Anna Mae Wong.**

It is also the *locus spiritualis*. When Dante on the ramparts of Paradise is shown the triumphal hosts of Christ by his beautiful guide Beatrice, the anti-Francesca, this woman of his youthful anxieties is now touched by

Grace because she is free of the rending of the senses, and so pure is her visage that Dante cannot describe it:

> ***Parìemi che le suo viso ardesse tutto,***
> ***e li occhi avea di letizia sì pieni,***
> ***che passer men convien sanza costrutto***
> **(It seemed to me her face was all aglow,**
> **and her eyes so full of gladness**
> **that I must pass it, undescribed.—*Paradiso* 23:22-24)**

According to K. S. Daly in *Sex*, "Male and female black-headed gulls (*Larus ridibundus*) normally face away from each other as prelude for courting, because, as very territorial birds, their front markings typically produce aggressive behavior in others of their species."

Face up, face down. What does it matter? "Wherever you are new there is earth somewhere beneath you waiting to take the little you leave," writes Philip Levine in one of his passages of prose which he insists on calling poetry.

***Fate*: The erotropic reach to full completeness, almost compulsive, leads one to question the determinism of Fate. Do we choose or are we chosen? (cf. the compulsory character of love choices) How else explain the conundrum of beautiful wives married to homely men: does a biological imperative stir women to choose for marriage good male providers, potential fathers, and security symbols, no matter how homely, rather than dark, lunar, handsome outlaws? Surely, childhood impressions also modify and shape those whom we later choose in life for spouses. And with men? Inferior mistresses are often loved over superior wives! Objectively, we are all unsuccessful lovers simply by nature of our own neurotic encumbrances! I have often wondered, what was truly being divulged in Diana Vreeland's confessional remark, "All my life I've pursued the perfect red"?**

A family role is a fate. Brothers easily envy, sisters fight. The youngest is pampered, the oldest usually an earnest bore. "Which of us does not wish to kill his father?" asked Ivan Karamazov. Louise Erdrich wrote, "It is difficult for a woman to admit that she gets along with her mother. Somehow it seems a form of betrayal. . . . No, they must be responsible for our psychic weaknesses for the rest of our lives. It is all right to forgive our fathers. We all know that. But our mothers are held to a standard so exacting that it has no principles. They simply must be to blame." Horace never mentions his

mother in any of his work. The compulsion for Woody Allen in his films repeatedly to take the name of Jesus is parricidal. It is agony for a Christian to hear it done so casually. Tiny Tim the ukeleleist walked off talk-shows if that happened.

N.B. In hate, as in love, we tend to swap fates: hate simply pledges allegiance to the opposite ideal, and the topsyturvification of the emotions can be ironic. Serial killer David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam, now serving a prison sentence of three full lifetimes for shooting to death Stacey Moskowitz, among other victims, in asking God's forgiveness has found peace while at the same time Mrs. Neysa Moskowitz, the victim's mother and an innocent party in a grotesque chiasmus is consumed with hatred/revenge for the murderer. No, in looking for love and its solution we merely spin fortune's wheel and wait to see where it stops.

***Fatherhood cravings*: a constant craving for such is not infrequently a neurotic symptom, an egotistical desire to compensate for low sexual potency. Poor Leopold Bloom. "Physicians and druggists dispensing aphrodisiacs can testify to the prevalence of large families in the homes of almost impotent men." Handing out cigars at the birth of a child is pure hyperbole. Men create art in order to feel by some sort of psychic couvade what women feel in the birth of her child. What about Laura and her father and Ingmar Bergman's *Face to Face*?**

***Feet:* In Indonesia, feet are considered the sexiest part of the female body. (Mohammed considered the hand to be the most beautiful part of a woman.) Consider, however, the insult in Asia of putting one's foot on someone or even showing it—it is the lowest part of the body but is odor involved? Definitely the scent of a woman left in a shoe comprises a good part of the attraction. (Diderot argued that, of all the senses, smell was the most voluptuous.) Sandor Ferenzi suggests in *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality* that men especially luxuriate in making love to women specifically because their sexual organs smell of the ocean to which all men wish to return.**

***Fetishes, List of*: hair, throat, neck, clothing, shoes, feet, garter belts, not just nylon stockings but with the perfect denier and line and color, a letter. Novelist Jean Genet got aroused by the sight of a badge on a policeman's uniform ("maleness violently concentrated"). A gomphipothic obsessive is sexually aroused by the sight of beautiful teeth. The alienated flower-child**

named Noah (Tuesday Weld) in the movie *A Safe Place* (1971) develops a bizarre sexual preoccupation with telephone numbers, passionately fixating on exchanges such as Hudson and Gramercy. "It's all on the dial," she explains. A fetishist is basically a sentimentalist, his objects radiating a "magical" field that co-opts him like memory. ("It has no qualities of its own, or rather, its essential reality is held in abeyance," notes Terence Sellers in *The Correct Sadist.*) Sex objects provide virtual reality. Leather. Rubber. Nylon. The exact curve, motion, nap, and color are deeply important to a fetishist. Irrational fetishes: wristwatches, Ping-Pong balls, perfume bottles, dishes, water. (N.B. Orthodox Hindu religion prohibits sexual intercourse in water.) The *disembodiment* behind fetishism is amazing! Even women's voices! Voices alone! James Joyce loved women's panties. (What about silks and soft clothes?) Leviticus proscribes rare meat, shellfish, bacon, and the wearing of nylon mixed with wool.

Monks following the Rule of Saint Benedict are abjured from wearing soft underwear. Dostoevsky was a foot-fetishist. So was Victor Hugo, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Goethe, whose mistress endearingly referred to his penis as "Mr. Nicefoot." There are frequent references to shoe fetishism in the work of pornographer Restif de la Bretonne. René Descartes had a fetish for cross-eyed women. What Diana Vreeland's Venetian manicurist Perrera loved more than anything else in the world was a woman's hands. "When he came in the evening into my room in Paris," wrote Vreeland, "I don't think he would have noticed if I'd been naked. He worshiped Barbara Hutton, for instance, who supposedly had the most beautiful hands in the world." Picasso felt the same way about Dora Marr's hands and in 1936 asked her for her gloves as a souvenir of their first meeting. Mark Twain was obsessed with young girls, according to his secretary, particularly those who wore "butterfly bows of ribbon" on the backs of their heads. Women commonly fall in love with uniforms of all kinds. According to John Climacus in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, it is the height of lechery for a person to rave over animals and inanimate things. In the Old Norse sagas, Kormakr glimpses Steingerdr's ankles when she is standing behind a door and forever after this is the only part of her body in which he expresses interest. Up to the year 1925, the act of showing the back of a woman's legs in advertising was considered to be as firm a taboo as vulgarly displaying her most private parts. In 1909 Karl Kraus proclaimed, "There is no unhappier creature on earth than a fetishist who yearns for a woman's shoe and has to embrace the whole woman."

"Women have always had an affinity for fragile foundations and wil-

lowy walking, and men have always responded erotically to the sight of it," wrote William A. Ross in *The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe* (1976). Foundations: Even sexpot Marilyn Monroe's delicate signature was written, as it were, almost lying down. "The Quiddity Factor": How many generations of women have been crippled by high heels, which turns them into "question marks"—ass out, stomach in, breast tilted forward. Isn't exaggerating nature defacing it? Reread H.L. Mencken *In Defense of Women* (Chpt. 2) and its ludicrous misogyny.

Curiously, fetishism is rare among women, whose lure, however, is immeasurably powerful. Young men or boys who are attracted to skin, find in the softness of silkiness and satin a substitute, whether in shoes or smells or stockings. Being warned off such things by adults, often sternly, as a result can provoke fixations on such objects in the chastised. Lust becomes a way, maybe the only way, of coming to a woman or even conceiving her in the abstract. Victims, often maimed, become, as it were, executioners—meaning that they are hurt into doing something about it. A trigger is pulled in the mind. Baudelaire in *Les Fleurs du Mal* ("L'Amour et la crane") wrote,

L'Amour est assis sur le crâne
De l'Humanité

Gerontophilia is a neurosis, the victims of which are attracted only to very old men or women, safety, comfort, and food having been assured them probably by a grandfather to whom they cling for neurotic reasons.

Fidelity: Proofs weary the truth: when you have to insist on fidelity, its erosion has already begun. Remarkably, our greatest epics, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, twelfth-century B.C. soap operas in a sense, both raised as their central themes the question of sexual infidelity. Penelope and Helen are the bookends.

Fiji: Touching someone's hair is as taboo in the Fiji islands as touching the genitals of a stranger would be, say, in Vermont.

Fiol, H.: In 1877, exactly two hundred years after the discovery of spermatozoon by the famous optician Anton van Leeuwenhoek of Delft, this Swiss biologist succeeded in observing the entry of sperm into the ovum of a starfish and so proved the true process of human fertilization. Ar-

istotle had previously thought that women, like men, contributed semen, Aquinas agreed in like essentials, while Rene Descartes popularly thought conception all happened in a mist of steam.

***First Night, The right of*: This medieval custom, whereby the lord of the manor may spend the night with every bride within his jurisdiction before her husband could, was not merely a lewd and pointless rule, for it made the first-born of every family the putative descendant of the chief and fostered a deeper loyalty to him among his followers.**

***Flagellation*: Swinburne's inordinate liking for whipping. Swine Burn. Christ being whipped as a "romantic" agony? Surely the complicated tressing of women's lingerie, straps and snaps and fishnet stockings, is a temptation to men—who wear only "briefs"—who want to fight through a network of baffles to get to the female body, as well as a venereal crossword of sorts in the semiology of flagellation. Critic Kenneth Tynan, an adept, reported that "physical pain was not a source of pleasure to the masochist, rather the unpleasant price that must be paid for the pleasure that precedes and follows it. . . . There is no sport to touch it," he recorded in his diary. "The apprehension, the preparation, the threat, the exposure, the humiliation—these are thrilling, and so is the warmth afterwards, and the sight of the marks; but the impact of cane on bottom is no fun at all."**

Eugene took a pen and on that card quickly scribbled a remark he had earlier made about Rapunzel: "I miss you so much I could bark." He added, "Is howling in love a need?" then filed that card.

***Flaubert*: Although prosecuted for indecency in writing *Madame Bovary*, unlike lesser French writers like Xavier de Montepin and the youthful Catulle Mendès, he managed to escape with censure. The great novelist of *le mot juste* was in love with a prostitute named "Crucifix." A lover of tarts, he also indulged in shady experiences and let himself be masturbated by masseurs ("kellaa") in Egypt. Arabic music made him need to pee! He rehearsed women's names. What about women's names? Ladies whose names are one-word titles of songs and poems—why?—are usually vamps, tramps, or heartbreakers: Nola, Marie, Phyllysse, Martha, Dolores, Clementine, Lois, Jezebel, Madeleine, Evelina, Chloe, Ruby, Nona, Rosalie, Lolita, Hannah, Nanette, Tina. Laura. Oh God, now what have we here. A geranium, a hollyhock, among rampant roses. This calls for downsizing!**

Any fool can add; it takes a genius to subtract!

***Food*: Carême identified Baba au Rhum à la Chantilly as a "male pastry" and insisted it should be reddish. "The world of cakes and pastry," writes French gourmand Robert Courtine, "is visibly inhabited by males and females. A woman the meringue, oh and infinitely so." Apple pies, strawberry tartlets, he adds, are also female. "Éclairs, on the other hand, are self-evidently masculine." Couplings, couplings. Truffles, oysters, yerba maté tea, rocket ambergris pastilles, walnut, koisunda, hottentot fig, surnag, foie gras. "True stories deal with hunger, imaginary ones with love," wrote Raymond Queneau. Food inseminates itself, seed to seed. We love our refluxions. Write an essay on the mirroring of ourselves in what we love.**

Albert Goldbarth in "Still Lives":

> **The way a potato leans outside of its own deep-umber definition, into the hump of another potato, which is shaded off into haze. . . . And the sexual enthusiasm of one buff, blush-bodied peach for another, for anything, their velvet clefts. . . .**

Cross reference: Tiger penis soup is highly regarded as a sexual stimulant in East Asia, at $300 a bowl. Capers are supposedly a Jewish aphrodisiac. Grand bamboo is a common ingredient in aphrodisiac potions and not surprisingly attractive to men since some species grow to 120 feet, as much as up to four feet an hour! King Kong! A crude Discknickers joke: Q. Did you hear about the Jew with an erection who walked into a wall? A. He broke his nose. Why have nations hated the Jewish race for 2000 years? It is probably the most neglected and ignored subject in history; what is the taboo? N.B. Read all of cannibalism literature. Cannibalism is illegal in neither the United States nor Great Britain.

***Fools:* Always coparcener with the saint. In drama, film, literature, he is never sexual. (Why is the classic "fool" never a woman?) Lear's jester, Sir Launcelot Greaves, Jack Pudding, Mr. Dick, Gringoire, etc. Innocence is sexless. Discknickers dismisses all Jewish comedians—and it does seem that all comedians are Jewish—as fools for money. He insistently points out that the play *The Producers* (1968), a parable of corruption all about money in which fat producer Max Bialystock kisses—smooches—accoun-**

tant Leo Bloom to help him get rich by cheating, slobberingly smooches the manuscript of "Springtime for Hitler," vulgarly spends wet kisses on the director of the play, is subtextually deeply anti-Semitic, caricaturing the shamelessness in Jews of constantly pursuing the one thing necessary in life, money.

***Freedom*: What is its sexual dimension? Is grace necessary for celibacy? A violin's emptiness is the occasion of its song: monasticism (*monachos* = alone, aloneness). N.B. Was the older Bogart correct in the film *Sabrina* when he confides to the young Audrey Hepburn, "No man walks alone by choice"?**

***Fricative, Labiodental, references to*: "plucking the yew" in folk etymology changes to "pluck yew." "Fuck you" = the fig. Angry Vanni Fucci in Dante's *Inferno* insultingly makes this vulgar gesture of the "man in the boat" to the poet: a clitoral insult. Investigate the story of "giving the finger." Sexual gesture. Martial mentions someone pointing a finger as "an indecent one." Suetonius, writing about Augustus Caesar, expressly mentions that the emperor angrily "expelled Pylades . . . because when a spectator started to hiss, he called the attention of the whole audience to him with an obscene movement of his middle finger." Tybalt to Mercutio: "Do you bite your thumb at me?" (The thumb pushed between the medial and index fingers was a clitoral taunt.)**

Before the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, the French, anticipating victory over the English, proposed to cut off the middle finger of all captured English soldiers so the English longbow could never again be drawn.

***Frigidity*: a state of abnormal sexual indifference. Algorgynia. Want of ardor. There is not one direct mention of homosexual lovemaking in all of Sappho's poetry: was this a defense against sex for a higher purity? Doesn't beauty beckon to the alliance of sex? (Where are the loveliest women in the world? Suchou, China. Bologua, Italy. Bangkok, Thailand.) So many shades of celibacy, from the Essenes to the Montanists to the Cathari to fifth-century desert anchorites to the Shakers, even those unlikely creatures frightened of the flesh, like Paul Cézanne, burying his bathers in foliage. (Cf. *mariage blanc*.) Where do frigidity and virginity meet? In either the woman-hating insanities of Otto Weininger or the man-hating lunacies of Adrienne Rich's idea of "compulsive heterosexuality," easily the biggest load of bollocks since Andreas Capellanus in *De remedio* repudiated**

sexual love. They were all screwballs. And yet Ambrose, Saint Augustine's tutor, was the apostle of virginity and devoted five lengthy works to the subject. His powerful book in praise of Saint Thecla, the virgin of Antioch who after being abducted and brutally placed in an Asian brothel managed to escape only to suffer a martyr's death, aroused such interest that young maidens came not only from Milan but from as far away as Africa to take the veil under his patronage. Christ seems to have had real sympathy with the vow of voluntary celibacy (Matthew 19:12). So what do we do with I Timothy 4, which actually condemns it? Doesn't violence involve an ambiguity between seduction and terror? Salvador Dalí considered the sex act too violent, saying that "Geometricians never get a hard-on." Is the Eskimo or Inuit exchange of wives (*nulianititi'jung*) about sexual energy in the husbands who practice or indifference?

N.B. American puritanism. Our fear of sex, love of violence. Fred and Wilma Flintstone were the first couple on television to be shown together in bed.

What is being confessed in the frigidification of the American landscape? Lawn is carpeting, but pure smooth green is boring, even abnormal. Grass *needs* dandelions, clover, crabgrasses, bugs, *action*. Houses did not have lawns around them until the advent of the power lawnmower. Sheared lawns down through the ages, made perfect by seed mixes and chemicals, have become status symbols. (The poor have always lived in proximity to their landscapes. We tend to think of our landscape less as land than as ornament, but the poor have to work their land and think of it that way.) A Bermuda grass lawn consumes more water than household members! It was once difficult to have a lawn. It had to be cropped by an animal. It is not only a battle of bad taste, but of conformism. We need beauty, not convention! Where is originality in our lives?

Most American gardens are hideous. Japanese gardens don't belong here. Yews, yews, yews, yews, all jammed in next to the house's foundations! Why do Americans think that bark mulch is ornamental? Insist on tight bushes? Rhododendrons with mauve buds? Zinnias? Daffodils? Forsythia? Isn't it plant sadism? Sixty-seven percent of Americans—this is true—list gardening as their #1 hobby; I would have thought it was television-watching or mall-walking or recreational shopping. Comment? There are no frontiers left in the United States to explore. The whole concept of the heroic, our dreams, are linked to the concept of a New Frontier. (Cf. sad Willie Loman, a cheat, a liar, an adulterer, an idle boaster of no self-esteem, a failure as a father, works in a garden by flashlight in order to create

something.) We in our xenophilia avoid our own native plants: black-eyed susans, daisies, liatris, pansies, petunias.

***Frottage*. The sexual act of rubbing against someone, furtively, in most cases, as in a crowd or on a public conveyance. (Wasn't it frottage on the Emperor Tiberius's part who kept a swimming pool stocked with boys encouraged to nibble him as he swam about?) Is it most successfully done if the other party is unaware of it? What is the nature of an embrace? Can consolation, for example, be sexual? And is it a question of coguition that we of each sex are looking for examined truth? It is said that men's legs resemble the front legs of an elephant and women's the hind legs. Shouldn't krukohibidinous behavior—the salacious compulsion to be constantly watching the crotch of girls or women—be filed under "frottage," or would that rather be an aspect of voyeurism?**

***Fur*: The repulsive atavism of wearing another skin next to one's own, never mind *killing* animals! (Should not the act of killing animals be called "furder"?) Simone de Bouvoir confidently asserted that all normal women derive more sensual pleasure from caressing the soft, smooth body of a child or of another woman than from stroking the rough and angular body of a man. The favorite sexual accessory of James Bond, Agent 007, was a mink glove. In sex, women use it on him! (See *lanugo*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Peltz*.) What is the definitive fur movie? *Gorky Park? That Touch of Mink? Auntie Mame? Flesh and the Devil* (1926), in which Garbo, wearing the most beautiful fur coat ever shown on screen, drowns in a lake while wearing it? *Ainsi soit-il.* Ask Chasuble. (Marilyn Monroe playing Miss Caswell in *All About Eve*, positively glistening in her few scenes as she outshone everybody else, was obviously directed to wear that fur coat. She was too kind to flaunt such cruelty.) *Rebecca?* ("Feel this. It was a Christmas present for Mrs. DeWinter," whispers Mrs. Danvers, virtually recapitulating her own groveling lesbian attraction for her former employer as she rubs the fur sleeve of a coat—lustfully—on the cheek of DeWinter's unnamed second wife [Joan Fontaine].) It is probably Claude Chabrol's film *Les Biches* (1968), starring Stéphane Audran—who was the director's wife—as the predatory socialite Frédérique, wearing a sumptuous wide-bottomed, fur-trimmed Nina Ricci coat in which she strolls along Paris's Pont des Arts and for which she is knifed by the menacing street-walker-artist called Why (Jacqueline Sassard), who crassly first imitates, then usurps her life. Brigitte Bardot, one of the most beautiful actresses**

in the world, launched a passionate crusade against the fur trade in particular and the whole idea of cruelty to animals in general. In cold retaliation, hunters, butchers, and cretinous furriers have threatened her and even killed some of her own animals. "Animals are the last minority," the lovely French actress wisely declared. "Anyone who wears fur is wearing a cemetery on their backs."

Eugene pulled *Frottage* and quickly perused the card and returned it, satisfied. He slid back the file drawer, put on the record again, and sat down to relax, trying to listen to the words of the song:

> . . . you'll soon realize you're not so wise
> when the years bring you tears of regret.

The music nudged his melancholy. He regarded the drab walls of his rooms. At his age, it was slightly mortifying to be so church-rat poor, sitting in an old closed room with its weak lamp like a Dutch town by torchlight. Everything was either piled up or crowded in or stuck behind something else. Much of the mess was shouldered out of the way by need. He was always on his way somewhere in his mind. A condition favorable for the search for understanding and meaning, if not truth, Eyestones considered more a matter of intellectual pursuit than good housekeeping or making important connections in life. A man of daring, something of an adventurer, his travels represented an early disdain for the ways of social engineering that had made life, as he saw it, an endless and insane marathon of pathetic fame-sucking and glory-seeking. He had purposely under-utilized his talents and sought to hide any originality he had in order to redirect sympathies elsewhere.

After Vietnam, having experienced that irrational adventure overseas, he had became a sort of gadfly, sustaining an irreducible refusal to stay with any job for very long or pursue any particular career. Much of the grit around the stoveworks was due to his rather bad eyesight. His eye condition was called hyperopia. The thick spectacles he wore gave an earnest look to a figure otherwise tall and handsome, if true proportion was the yardstick. His regard was straightforward and constant. After his very inventive father had developed new ideas for organizing international charities, which would sadly prove ultimately insignificant, his parents had moved from New England to New York where Eyestones was born and raised until age nine when his father

died and they moved to Connecticut. He attended the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia to study violin but left after two years, moodily, to join the service, the very week in fact that his mother was killed in a traffic accident, a tragedy that his father never quite got over and that, for his grief, soon claimed him. "Don't be critical of other people, love much," were his last words to his son, who was holding his father's hands as he passed away. It was said that Eyestones had more talent than anyone in classes he later took in New York, studying music, even among friends during those impecunious years there where, after leading a life of free-floating anxieties, he became the foolish mystagogue he now was. Fame, recognition, meant nothing to him. Ten competent minds were worth more to him than the applause of whole unthinking multitudes.

When Eyestones was growing up, whenever anything frightened him to any degree, it almost always fascinated him at the same time. It was this sort of double or two-sided way of looking at things that later gave him the requirement as much as the desire to continue probing what most mystified him. Was the need for concomitance a sign of schizophrenia? Who could say? He never wanted to be that one thing in life—have one profession—that marked the boundary that, by stating what he could do, also stated what he could not. Following another Pessoan truism, "Suddenly there's no reason for existing socially," he continued his policy of self-distancing in the hope by dying to himself of trying to learn something profound. He never quite belonged. His conception of himself in the daily world was being a spectator on a world balcony watching a long, phantasmagorical procession pass, banners, trumpets, drums and all. The idea of his being actually in life, part of it, trooping with the rest of humanity, was long a comic, almost incredible notion for him, the idea of doing it with someone else impossible. Being single for him was a natural concept and was merely attached to the "itch of unbelonging." He had wanted even as a boy to leave home. Not join. Fly free. Keep moving. Never cling. Want little. Seek truth. Feel solace. Walk alone. Refuse help. Enjoy solitude. Be independent. Think hard. Trust nature. Know God. Hear silence. He once bought and thoroughly read a Loompanics book, *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found*—which incorporated one of his biggest escapist dreams. It had not come to mean *be single*, but that was the legacy of constantly feeling the need to leave, if not flee the world, the way the world was, what boldly stood out in the scrupulous and somehow defining proscription he remembered reading one night holed up in a

hangar in Southeast Asia in the epistle of I John 2:15: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world."

A person of fixed habits, nevertheless—meticulous, forceful, proud, stubborn—Eyestones was a person whose emotional investments were narrowly focused. He disliked being subverted by indirection, but he understood the nature of the divided heart. He was neither unimprovably diplomatic like Duxbak nor bullying like Warholic. Was not empathy the source—the requirement—of moral behavior? There was no doubt a complicated connection between his dependence on needing to think about human behavior and his periodic withdrawals from sight. He had two speeds: wide open and stopped; no moderation. When necessary, he could argue the horns off a goat. There were strange qualities about him. Sunshine bored him to distraction. He was fascinated with Egypt. He owned a violin handcrafted by Tarahumara Indians. Once while driving through Morocco he had seen a ghost. He knew how to bake a perfect Black Forest cake. He kept in his wallet a yellowing newspaper clipping of his first printed letter, an explanation of Amelia Earhart's whereabouts. He subscribed to no periodicals. He believed in animal rights.

He often felt the need of going too far simply to prove to himself that he was capable of doing so, of being able to do so, as an existence assertion. Daedalus, taking to the skies. Pascal, making a leap of faith. The breakdown in relationships occur not so much because the words are misunderstood, but because of the silences. But what silences? he wondered and, wondering, wound up his console and listened to Virginia Mason's "Chichicastenanga," Gertrude Lawrence's "Experiment," and Mabel Mercer's "Remind Me." He was in love with someone. It was true. And in a way, he thought, fatuously perhaps, if you love, you are loved. Was not to feel the emotion infinitely deeper than having it given to you?

The G-man of Love! That's what they called him at work after Warholic, scouring Cambridge and Greater Boston, hired him over several others for the position he held and with force and flattery gave him to believe it was less a job than a mission he could relinquish only for a want of altruism. It had all come about in a strange way. After putting aside working with a diligent but ultimately disorganized string quartet, he had taught night school for a while and then began to do a weekly column for an underground newspaper, writing on every subject and eventually finding, due to the exigencies of an interested public, that

the topic of love became the main one. It was mainly by writing for a decade that he earned his living, doing book reviews as well. The job at *Quink* was basically his weekly job, done for more money, not that he had saved any. He preferred traveling, buying books, listening to music. He had no savings at all, and there had been times he could not pay his rent. His column, its demands, its requirements, had proved to be more complicated than he had imagined. He had assumed a semi-public persona only to find the persona had assumed him. Why? He needed love himself, as who did not. He felt he was a fraud, however, not so much for selling the product that he himself wanted to buy, as for yearning to own something he was not even sure was available. Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair! He recalled her lovely face with a rhabdomantic shiver, picking up his orange cat and nuzzling his warm head. Touch kept her inside an object, it seemed to him, as was evident by the way she handled anything—a cat, a bag, a loaf of bread—seeking warmth. He himself loved the feeling experienced when doing someone a favor, not for the admiration received, but for the feelings of love it produced in him or her. Was this not what cats feel, masters of waiting, who in their disposition to be available, to be commodiously palpated, regard it as a favor conferred, not received? Why else do they purr? Was not prayer only the glow of having asked God for something? Wasn't utterance in the final analysis hope?

Or was prayer conspiracy?

He felt tired and, pondering the idea of lying down to read, almost smiled, suddenly pondering another hobbyhorse of his, that lately he began to find it hard to fall asleep if his right thigh (which must be separated by a blanket) touched his left. Only one more of the besetting obsessions in his life.

Was that the front-door bell?

He hoped not. He rose and walked to the door to listen, closing his eyes as whole minutes passed. He wished that he had shut off the lights. Quietly shifting positions, he held his breath against the arrival of Lilith and all prehensile night-flying demons who coursed through the world seeking to enter the souls of men, for he knew who it was. It would be no one else, in spite of the fact that he had sincerely asked her—as he had lost all sympathy with her, never mind passion—not to come by anymore. The plea went unheeded. When the staircase creaked a few more times, Eugene opened the door.

VII
Sneetch

There stood Laura Warholic, built like a slat, halfway up the stairs on her long, drawbridge feet. *The shape of dread*, he suddenly saw, *is its shapelessness*. She who was as long and sexless as a rolled umbrella had the small white face of a vireo, which, with its slack, unplugged look, a sort of twist of perplexed vacuity, gave her the look with her round welfare glasses of always being rained on. Her eyes were brown as monkeypod wood with pupils that were slightly unequal or mismatched, and sometimes when she looked at you she seemed to be staring past your head. All in all, it was a nutcracker profile. She wore her mouse-brown hair long and often dyed magenta, sometimes pulled way up in a scrunch-banded ponytail, like a guido bow, and out jutted like pineapple leaves a pair of long, bayonet-shaped ears. On this particular night, her hair had fallen free of its pins and, as usual, hung limp and brown. A slattern, tall, angular, somewhere about five-feet ten, she had a bent nose long as a rounce, thin, hairy arms, and a crooked, lopsided smile. Her thinness was actually dreadful, her breasts flat as fritters. It was inexplicable to him that whenever after an absence he saw her again, even a brief one, her face always seemed that of an utter stranger.

Close up, Laura's face, which always had a kind of greyhound lust in it, tended to appear extremely narrow. In point of fact, she had a small head. She wore a tiny black watch that she never took off, and a dime-store necklace with flat, tarnished links always hung around her

columnlike neck. When she became self-conscious, she was never quite sure which way to fold her arms, which inevitably she self-consciously kept folding and refolding with unsupple obsequiousness. Now here she was, smiling nervously, shifting feet, revealing those high, unattractive gums that seemed in fact almost as red as that wide mouth smeared like a fellatrix with so much lipstick that it seemed in its excess to parody a leer of invitation, its psychofelinistic color, its red rudeness, suggesting less by nature than art—artifice—that her kiss would never leave. There seemed in her tense posture an air of expectation and the disturbing conviction that he owed her something, which he needed like a cello needs chrome. Laura wore brown a good deal and always tight, ill-fitting clothes, with the repeated claim that her legs were so long and rangy that no good fit was ever possible, and on this particular night, along with a nubby, revolting, Burger King-yellow shirt, she wore hilariously awful brown shorts, now too big, which while she stood there making her appear even more bumless than usual, also gave her exposed white shins the comical look of stilts.

"You're too kind to get rid of me," Laura remarked after a moment. She was smiling. Her mouth as she spoke in an undervoice was as wide as a seagull's. She was in her comic extreme as a single object of invincible but insistent shadeless refusal almost a parody of weird Kundry, that tempting sextress referred to by Klingsor as the Nameless, the Primeval Demon, Rose of Hell, Herodias, his anima, his dark and lunar side, an endless and relentless shadow, crossbraced and inevitable and unquiet. Coyness seemed out of sync with her elongated ears.

It was the oddest thing. As Eyestones stood there watching her, he found nothing to say. Her words angered him so much she had to be right.

VIII
The Lacrymatrix

"Mickey has been telling me—" "Shhh," said Laura, stopping his mouth with her thin cold fingers. She did not want to hear about anything but themselves. They had crossed the river to the Cambridge side of the Charles, where along Memorial Drive the tall sycamores with their uneven flavescent patches of flecked, peeling bark resembled the camouflage of military uniforms. The near-empty branches making arthritic gestures toward the sky reminded him in the disheveled woman by his side, famished with disappointment, of her clawing need to get out of the spindly quaquaversal world in which, in spite of her desperate attempts otherwise, she had found herself all alone. She was slightly bowlegged and walked like a camel on stringy, calfless legs, bony and pencil-thin, raising each foot higher than average as she walked, a sort of overstepping cartoon version of striding or going forward, the flinging up and out of long shovel feet. On top of that, one leg as she walked appeared shorter than the other—and therefore so did her hips—a kind of bizarre shipboard gait where as she moved quickly forward she responded haltingly to the street, as if one foot were actually on toes. He was not sure if she knew what he was going to say Warholic knew.

He wondered if he would ever be free of her as he heard the sound of marching in the tops of the sycamores as they strolled along the embankment. An evening scent of black petunias hung in the air by

a small park they passed. She was squeezing his arm as they kept on walking.

"I'm all alone. I have no friends. Please don't shut me out. Don't desert me. I need you," she whispered with the wide eyes and beseeching mouth of that small, sharp, smudged Barbara Stanwyck of a face, snuffling up the sound of springing tears. Her breath, which was sour, had something of the odor of acetone. He consolingly turned to her but saw no tears. Her face was vise-tight and in the dark of night her big hair looked coarse as a mophead. "I want you."

"Don't," he said. "Please?"

Laura bristled.

"I've known you now for longer than two years," he pleaded, trying to soften his tone. "We've been friends, traveled together, gone through it all. We have nothing in common. It's awful. Remember how that day on the T you had a vision of our incompatibility? Hesitated to acknowledge me? Said I talked too fast? Wouldn't exert yourself or make an effort even to care? But then you later felt strongly?" She paused but he kept on walking. There was a round moon in the sky that threw shadows everywhere. "I'm sorry but now I don't feel that way about you anymore, Laura—not anymore, I'm afraid," Eugene said, looking sadly past the marcescent leaves and thinking *if what may and must be is, may what is remain*. He felt that at one time he might have fallen in love with her if she didn't mind getting soaked in the rain or expressed a love of children or maybe just once asked, "What do you long for?" But she never had and never would. It also meant that she would have been someone else. To him, inevitably, they shared nothing, for just as it is never strictly correct to say that the moon revolves around the earth, the two bodies of Laura Warholic and Eugene Eyestones, like those two disparate bodies, actually only merely revolved around their common center of gravity, or barycenter, and it was nothing more than place and time that now linked them, and most of the time not even that.

The litmus test he had always used to determine her sense of love or commitment or even caring when dropping her off at a bus station was whether, when getting on board the bus, she ever looked back to wave or smile or say goodbye, and she never did, not once, not ever. It never made him worry less about her. Even now her pyramid of hair, already growing grey in strands and looking like sea-blite, gave her a careless, slovenly, dead appearance, and the lines round her eyes

seemed to have deepened permanently. "I feel alone, isolated," she said, her vulturous face coming to a point, while her wide mouth, slack, with soft teeth, made one think of a skull. She resembled the scary cards of a Tarot pack, weak-lipped, spryless, a husk of unmotion. Her sharp-boned thinness was poultrylike. "Are you taking care of yourself?" asked Eugene. Speculating why she did not—or could not—gain weight, he wondered if she could not digest her food properly. Was it a lack of certain pancreatic enzymes? She was weak and suspicious, and in the way that an ominous silence on a crowded elevator, for example, seems to prove conclusively that we are all guilty and ashamed, unable to share, the deprivation of force in her, along with her shifting eyes, small forehead, and pale cold skin, imparted not only a general sullenness but the kind of expression that comes from extreme mental pain. Was it bulimia? Or something like malabsorption, a disease that usually affected infants under one year of age but then sometimes adults? On her arms had grown a layer of thin dark hair called lanugo, which Eugene had once read was in some cases of malnourished adults to be a primitive response to the problem of heat preservation caused by the loss of subcutaneous fat. Did she associate thinness, as anorexics do, with refinement and delicacy, only suddenly to have raised on her arms this sort of apelike horror?

Eugene, who was not attracted to her, had tried to befriend her. Unfortunately, she was embittered by having met with many rebuffs long before having met him. Her desperation in throwing herself at men invariably suggested to him the hideous paradox that in order to get a loan from a bank you have to prove you do not need it. But it was not only that. Like most homely, disenfranchised women who feel that they have been badly mistreated and elaborately ignored, and perhaps were, rocked with a thousand infatuations but constantly cast aside, she not only looked on the men that she needed and so resented with the kind of secret hatred her desperate liaisons, useless and neurotic sexual interludes, made inevitable by her loneliness—she had no girlfriends—but she had also become the child she never had and ironically did not want, a creature, or so she saw herself, abused, vilified, and ignored by a world that she felt was so much gentler to everybody else. She had become infatuated with her own ghosts. A self-indulgent quack in her head repeated, "I'm a victim! I suffer! I have been betrayed!"

Malady has its own language. She claimed to fear the very same illnesses she seemed to welcome, coping with her inabilities by raising

personal failure to a level of absolute genius. No one on earth, however, was more addicted than Laura to reading failure profiles. As to work, within an hour of knowing her, Eugene saw immediately she could not get a job pouring water out of a boot. Why when she said she wanted to do something did she stand in place? Did *anybody* in Generation X work? At the same time, she felt that she was beyond reproach, above criticism, outside the law. She had no discernible talent, except for dependence and transparent self-promotion. While she never went very far in any direction, she was a great thumping bore on the subject of her vocation. Marginalized by laziness and lack of vision, she was never unaware that time was passing. Since fear made her dependent, love became a fixation, making Eyestones conclude he did not want anybody feeling that inordinately about him or that hard, for it was not only obsessive but unnatural and far more about taking than giving, the diametric *opposite* of love. With obsession came jealousy, which he had already seen regarding her in dramatic excess. Her jealousy, which was born of her emptiness, thrived on it. She had no essence or identity or real job or any accomplishment, and sought, or so thought Eyestones, for some sort of "stigma" illness, like leprosy or bad memories of parental abuse or, who knew, duck's disease, as a legitimate excuse for all the time she had wasted in her life. It was an added irony that she often repeated, with the pop-cultural shorthand typical of her, claptrap recycled from the Seventies, that she *herself* wanted to counsel troubled people in some non-therapeutic way! Could such things be? Sleep was a drug for her. She often stayed in bed all day, bouts between staring at the ceiling and fitfully sleeping and waking on the cusp of self-repulsion and impossible nullity only to grow angry and think: *I write in an empty book. I cry in an empty room. I live with an empty heart. I will die in an empty room.*

She consistently refused to do the emotional work needed to gain control of her life and was of that generation of afterboomers, born in the Sixties, given to strenuously fashionable whining, advocates for the most part of disbelief and structureless, postmodern unmeaning that, while full of lame delays and sociological cant and undigested dogma, was comprised of essentially one major complaint made not from the problem of too much strength but rather from the lack of it, just as, for example, short, roosterish men are somehow always talking the loudest while arrogant men tend always upon close examination to be the weakest of the lot, and that was: I am not interested in doing a single thing worthwhile.

Laura by refusing to heed her troubles therefore could not cure them. Was this not the paradox of the feast of Purim? During the reading aloud of the scroll of Esther, when Jews customarily use noisemakers to blast out and excoriate Haman's diabolical name, mustn't they first haplessly listen *for* it in order to drown it out?

With indiscriminate denunciation and unrepentant fury, Laura had taken refuge from her failures by blaming everyone else for her own shortcomings, habitually attributing routine human unkindness and quarrelsomeness and backbiting to virtually anyone who had blundered into her life: roommates, ex-friends, old high-school acquaintances, her three mentally ill sisters, several ex-lovers, indeed her father and mother. Her slovenly and disorganized spirit was ever a challenge to her to try to oppose it by improvement. She was unsparing in her selfishness, total misanthropy, a bomb-throwing anarchist of accusations, devoid of irony, a completely insincere, strategyless loser not from chance but by a whole variety of willful misdecisions. Her nature was such that whenever she glimpsed that she could not achieve anything of vision, she automatically transformed the realization of that vision, not as something impossible to achieve, but as a thing to be avoided. The kind of self-adjustment that inexorably took place within her, where worth was measured, inevitably disparaged anything of worth. It became truly impossible to be with her. Eyestones could no longer care. It all happened without preamble and without warning, and in a way that was the worst of it.

Afterwards he told himself that if he had only seen it coming he could have headed it off—and he would have. But he saw nothing at first. He had not seen it when they had returned from their long, cross-country trip, an ordeal in her company that had abraded his nerves. Nor had it been clear when he saw Laura only sporadically in those months after their return, usually on weekends, that period when her manner began to seem so cryptic. It crept on him noiselessly, insidiously, like a green lizard seated suddenly on his head. Was it his own failure that he had not banished her from his life?

"I am your friend," she had once said to him.

Was she? he had wondered at the time. A dream of idle pleasure is a beaver's nightmare.

"My friend?"

"Your friend," said Laura in her failed coquettish dog-and-cat-sized Beatrix-Potter-*Pie-and-the-Patty-Pan* voice, "*and* enemy." She found no

disconnect in the concept, making him wonder if she had not put her finger on the paradox of love. Or marriage. Or relationships in general. He knew that she had fought personal battles on that turf before. Background makes foreground.

Never had he, could he have had, an objective view of her. Her ineffectiveness evoked his pity, and he was constantly asking himself: Isn't there more than a hint of innocence in one accepting one's self as a failure? Is there not true humility in finding one's self undeserving? What about her mad need over and over again to see that film, *The Night Porter*? Was a repeated action of that kind an attempt at lucidity? At self-reinforcement? A gesture against disintegration?

It was her tack with him from the beginning that Eyestones take care of her when once at *Quink* in a stand-off between her and Warholic in the lobby—he was panfuriously shaking her like a long intravenous pole that in her longitude she physically resembled—she had him singled out as someone who would help her. Was that it? Or was it the case, as for some time now he had come to see, of someone hysterical on the cusp of paralyzing desperation chalking his back as being the next victim? Kindness in others she saw as softness, softness as weakness, and weakness was something she knew she could exploit. She always had the courage of her contradictions, the first example of which was that she often came over to his rooms and stayed late, hoping that by then he would allow her to stay. He knew her too well. She was typically entering the "Café des Incohérents," as Eugene often described it. It was her all over, telling "Truths," as the Fool told Lear, "that a dog must to kennel," interposing bullshit in her explanations like the vowels a jabbering Fijian with the juxtaposing need of his language always has to insert between two consonants in order to pronounce word. *Karasito*!

"I can't take the loneliness," exclaimed Laura, stopping and revolving a tiny ring in worry. At times, when something came into her head her brown eyes seemed to stop working. She said she had been threatening to return to San Francisco. Did she still intend to do so? Was there any damage in hope? wondered Eyestones. But then what did it put in the way of hope? Did it refuse the present? As they resumed walking, while looking around and pondering whether moonlight acted as a purifying medium, taking civilization out of the landscape, he came to the conclusion that he would rather be alone than with someone he did not love. Didn't Fernando Pessoa, who sought complete detachment from

life, which was probably an attempt to get out of the world, turn to the realm of art and convert his sexual drive into writing? "I need to *talk* to you," said Laura. "I've begun having anxiety attacks and can't move. I need to see a therapist but have no money."

"You can't save any money, you mean? Is that what you're saying, you can't save it?"

She looked blank as an unused check.

"Not really."

"Maybe if you budgeted it, you could. Thoreau once lived for eight months on exactly $61.99¾. Although, granted, he often went home for lunch." Taking off his eyeglasses, Eugene looked serious. "Eight months."

"When was this, in the Middle Ages?"

Every visit brought a new disaster. Her default rainbow rose over the rim of every rain. She had a punch list of grievances each and every week: a lost job, lack of money, hatred of a roommate, being depressed, a cruel letter from her father, a new illness, her mother's neglect, having to find a new flat, the need of a car or a ride, etc. It was a condition with her, a state of becoming, chaos. Chaos and sameness. The more the sparks, the worse the welding. Something was definitely wrong with her. He also suspected, when he thought about it, that coincident with their return from traveling across the country that she had been seeing different men on a nightly basis—brief, feckless flings whose unsavoriness was clear—but it was her doing and he no longer considered it any of his business, pity her though he did.

"Your health insurance won't cover that?"

Laura made a sour retreating face and said nothing and camel-walked along beside him, only to confess, "I've been fired."

"*Again*?" gasped Eugene.

Came a pause.

"Laura?"

Not a word.

"Remind me, weren't you working there less than five months?"

There was a notary behind every silence.

"Will you move back to the West Coast?" He closed his eyes and made a wish.

"Can I stay with you for the weekend?"

IX

The Dreadful Reality of Being Oneself

Laura Warholic and Eugene Eyestones first became acquainted in an odd way. Several weeks after flying in from San Francisco and landing on the East Coast, she had telephoned him cold from her mother's apartment in Newburyport, Massachusetts, declaring that because of his intercession at *Quink* in a furious argument between she and her husband she wanted to meet him—was he willing?—a rendezvous she would paradoxically and with angry jealousy hold against him in later arguments as proof of his easy availability with any woman who out of the blue chose to call him. He had not wanted to meet her. It was not that he had hesitated. He had been completely indifferent. After he acquiesced, she took the train down on the Haverhill commuter line to North Station where they met for the first time in the dim under-lobby of the old Boston Garden. *Magra*, he immediately thought. *The Lean Magrinha. Her Thinness*. So thin. A sparkle in the eyes, brown but slightly off-center. Jittery. Mistinguett, he thought. Titine. Laura had immediately seen him, but, all arcs and angles, she began self-consciously looking away with a silly smile. She was dreadfully thin. His first thought was that she looked like one of those anomalous dime-store manikins fashioned with rubber ears so they can wear earrings. She was bony and hopeless-looking and colorless as a gannet. He noticed right off that she had an odd waist-to-hip ratio and a lack of facial symmetry. Her nose was long, as were her ears, and he thought that she looked

like Pontiac, chief of the Ottawas, or—who was that movie actress? It was impossible not to feel corrected in his long-held and sympathetic idea that connected superiority in a woman with plainness of face. They spent the next few hours together, walking around. They went to Faneuil Hall. It had been a dark, rainy day, and in Goodspeed's bookshop on Milk Street, when pity surged in him for the cracked life he almost immediately intuited she was living like a small flame of light in an otherwise dark Atget photograph, Eugene gave her a quick buss of reassurance, a bonk on the lips, mouth closed, while she recoiled, pretending to be scandalized. Recalling the event in later arguments she would always accuse him of being forward, conveniently choosing to overlook the fact that on her initiative she went home with him that very night to spend the weekend. Then he remembered, *Of course—Barbara Stanwyck.*

He often recalled that she had seemed goosey and likeable that first day with the same mad, mirthful, wily glint in her eye as Lansing Campbell's illustrations of Uncle Wiggily. She was not girlie but hard in a sticklike way with a where's-the-floor gaze and a hint of a sullen streak, but her need to get to know someone, anyone, seemed to prevail in making her game. Her breasts were flat as a flush deck ship. She had a weak and timid handshake suggesting dormouse valor, but in fact actually held out only civil fingertips. She was carrying a paperback copy, to appear intellectual, no doubt, of *The Songs of Maldoror* by the Count of Lautréamont.

"Do you like it?" asked Eyestones, gesturing to the book she was reading. It was a mistimed question, as he found out later that it was one of Mickey Warholic's books. Reading was never really the point with her. When they had settled on where they would first meet in Boston, for example, Eugene jokingly told Laura, "I will be the middle-aged man carrying an umbrella in one hand and the Poetical Works of Wordsworth in the other." "Are you serious?" she asked. "I'm only kidding," said Eugene. But she sounded too bewildered to leave it unexplained. "You know," he laughed, "like the opening scene in *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan.*" There followed a somewhat uncomfortable pause. "Are you there?"

"Yes," she said.

"Have you read it? It's a novel—by Aldous Huxley," he clarified.

"Who?" she soberly asked.

"Huxley?"

Silence.

Laura smiled infrequently but when she did it was diffident and awkward, revealing a high-gummed grin that had something of the ferret about it. Hers was the scared smile the partially deaf often show—a smile not so much of willingness as of a slightly defeated lack of understanding. Her mouth, which should have been pert for the size of her face, was too wide and full, especially when smiling or laughing when she showed the air of a self-conscious fribble. She was ill at ease with herself. There was a lot of inappropriate laughter.

"Is the book a favorite of yours?"

She nodded. "*The Songs of Maldoror.*" She held it out. "There's an honesty about it," she offered, sounding inauthentic.

"Except the author's," said Eugene, laughing, "who was not a count at all but a penniless Uruguayan who committed suicide in Paris in 1870 at the age of twenty-four. 'I'm like a dog with its love for the infinite,'" he quoted. Laura with a bizarre tilt of her head seemed charmed by his brassiness but somewhat chastened by his knowledge.

"Weren't there options for you out in California when you lived there?"

"California?"

"San Francisco."

"Forget it."

"But you lived there, no?"

"I'm not there now, am I?"

"But if you wanted, you could—"

"That was in another country," she said—marked fall in tone—and sighed. "Things are much different now. All's changed."

He shrugged. "How?"

As they walked through Quincy Market, she revealed something of the "dentist chair" syndrome, looking neither right nor left. There were points of interest to see she ignored. He immediately shelved the idea he initially had of showing her any part of historical Boston.

"Mickey screwed me."

"And?"

"I need new clothes, a car, a good bicycle would do, a computer, and a printer to get a new job. You couldn't lend me the money, could you? For e-mail. Don't mind me. I feel like I'm facing a squiring fod." She tended to muddle the language when she was nervous. "Everything seems nurse at white." She giggled, twisting a ring. "I mean worse. At

night. I've lied awake at night worrying—"

He tapped her nose. "Lain awake."

"Whatever. Can you help me?"

She stopped. She looked at him, blushing a bit at her own lack of tact. Her head swiveled slightly in embarrassment. It was a look that he would find out only later was the slightly clouded if alert expression with which she characteristically greeted the world.

"I wish I could," he replied. "I can't afford it. I use ancient tools myself, to tell the truth. What about a typewriter?" *Or pencil and paper!*

"Why not smoke signals?"

The sarcasm amused him. He found her interesting enough, her cheeky bravado. He accepted her, without feeling, after being with her some time, but he felt he needed to choose among several ways of seeming interested. It was guileful, perhaps. So be it, he thought. Multiple in fascinating ways she was not. The humorless dullard, immune to complexity and filled with unresolved hostility, was not yet in evidence, and she who would eventually prove bottomlessly needful seemed at the time only a lonely person happy to be meeting someone else. It recapitulated much of himself. A certain amount of effort and thought had gone into her clothes, but her dumb, badly cut bangs, straight skirt, and sensible shoes evoked the shopgirl or the secretary in a way she could not hide. She was a John Held, Jr. cartoon of the jittery flapper: blouse, short skirt, pipe-cleaner arms, and a vanity case for a purse. He smiled to himself. *Be nonchalant*, he thought. *Light a Murad.*

After only a few days of knowing Laura, Eugene had heard it all. She who had arrived in Boston with a numbing sense of her own lack of direction had spent more than a decade doing virtually nothing but looking for a man. Boredom is a form of anxiety. He could see that, as with all bored people, she constantly fled from herself. She liked music. She came from upstate New York. Her parents had divorced when she was seventeen or so. She once owned a dog. She liked to wear tiny rings. She did not drive. She read to no consequence. What about growth? Self-knowledge? Rebellion? Had she never moved with Piagetian inexorability into a rebellious phase—even young Communism—that might lead to finding herself? She was nidifugous, he knew, from several icy references she made with irritated references to her mother. He knew more. She had done virtually nothing with her life since having graduated from college but aimlessly knock around, occasionally doing part-time work in business offices like typing and filing

or taking entry-level jobs for a month or two at tech companies with farcical futuroidal names like Plastrix, Bulbtech, Radiotron, Arbitron, Datagen, Cyberthon, Earthtek, Unistrobe, Morphonetics, Tubestron, Pixilonics, Quitrol, Calistics, Doltbole, Supprexx, Megacube, Softknot, Compudyne, and Vaginocon, places that made things like electronic gizmos and alphanumeric geegaws, soulless, antiseptic firms that in their mad drive for more production had spent years hiring aggressive professional "facilitators" with theories of innovative management and team-building who, breaking low echelon workers down into desperate little groups, on one or two weekends a year in remote, rustic locations, cheer-led them on with rhythmic handclapping and robotic phrases, like "Let's acknowledge ourselves!" and "Capture that flip chart!" and "Renew profile day!" It was also a decade that found Laura traveling to no consequence. Once she went to Mexico or Guatemala—or was it Prague? He was never sure. And had she told him she climbed the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan or the Mayan stones at Palenque or was it that she went in search of the sacred *cenote*? He could not recall. Whenever traveling abroad, Laura's method, at least as she told it, was to buttonhole strays and strangers and stay with them, barnacle-like. Hooking up was the concept. As she would have it, the fact of her being uprooted and groundless seemed to reawaken in her a disposition to take risks. Eyestones never saw a single example of this. Going overseas, however, had apparently infected her with an incurable taste for European movies, the kinds of film with subtitles in which people were always breaking baguettes in half to eat and waving goodbye backwards with one raised hand opening and closing and always riding bicycles down leaf-dappled, poplar-lined lanes at the end of the film, usually with a dog in tow. Laura had a kind of witless candor and quite unapologetically told him stories with gruntled satisfaction of meeting various foreign guys and having chance sexual encounters with them under bridges or in alleys or off piazzas and then living with this or that one for a brief period. Some Spanish dork or Romanian sailor or Greek muttjack. A shrimp's heart is in its head, he thought, and only pitied her. It was a rogue's gallery of names that Eyestones could never keep straight. Drazen. Miklos. Antonio. Santorini. Derek. Manolo. The xenophilia of her pronouncing the names in order to impart an air of authenticity to her stories was only amusing. But the men never made her happy. Each brief account of her sexual pupilage sounded sadder than the previous one. The losses alone seemed to register. She

lived behind the mobile fortress of a deep or almost tranquil pessimism in which she seemed to lose belief in everything but loss. She also mentioned abortions. Eyestones was not surprised. It was a guess he would have made had it occurred to him. Her pelvis was oddly tilted, and she could not use a diaphragm.

She had once worked in New York City, living in Astoria, and taking trains in and out, but going nowhere. Jobs cost money to keep, and she was always in arrears with too much month left at the end of the money. Her longest residence had been in San Francisco, for five years, shacking up at first with Warholic who was living on SSI and then going ahead with a stupid marriage that had ended when in a final fit of rage over a telephone bill, half of which she had asked him to pay, he had apparently tried to strangle her. Police were called, neighbors awakened, the whole thing. "I could have sent him to jail. I should have married his black friend, Lamont," she said, to whose name she invariably added, "A major snack." "What does that mean?" asked Eugene. "You know," replied Laura, leaning close with a sexually avaricious wink. She had the odor of mice. "Buff. In shape. Goomable." She stuck out her jaw and lustfully closed her eyes. "He smelt like timber." "Was Warholic your lover very long before he became your husband?" asked Eugene, tentatively. Laura popped her eyes. "Lover? That fat prick with leaky-gut syndrome, intestinal parasites, constipation? That's a good one," she cackled. "*Shwanz, shwanz, shwanz!* His cock was no bigger than a pencil eraser! A tiddledy-wink!" It was always the ex-wife's first betrayal, thought Eugene as he heard her calumny. Nothing of that got in her way, however. Oddly, but not surprisingly, after Warholic had moved to Massachusetts, Laura followed in his wake like foam. Of course it was part of their pattern. No better proof existed of her turpitude, of her desperation, than to duplicate a partner's mistakes, choosing to commit further errors rather than daring to try to correct them. We prefer a traditional pain that is known to a new pleasure that is not. It pointed to some degree, he felt, why Laura was morally damaged in the faculty of autonomy.

The way Eyestones got it, her father was an impossible person to please, a weak, idle, parsimonious failure who after walking away from his wife and family and then remarrying had shut them out of his life, turning both her and her mother into frustrated, resentful rejects. From what Laura had told him, he concluded that mother and daughter each bore the stamp of an auntiness they both loathed, a thing that

discarded or unclaimed women hate, as they sniped at each other with a kind of inherited strafe-training. By the affectless way she spoke of her mother, it seemed that that poor divorcée was not only the root of Laura's pain as well as the source of her words—mainly by neglect, by sloth—but also the teacher of how to pass it all on, engendering a daughter who by a kind of projective identification merely passed on by rote the very revenges and odd imbalances that she had inherited.

On the second weekend that Eugene had met Laura, he had driven her back to Newburyport to save her the train ride and on the same day got to meet her mother. It was a Sunday. A fat, nervous, disaffiliated, ball-headed creature in Big Yank jeans, balloon-round and vague, Mrs. Shqumb was a painful case, lonely as winter dusk and dependent on all sorts of tranquilizers to get through the day. She had a face round as a pocket-watch with a circle of head quoted by an orotundity of body that gave her the dull, bulky look of a stackable bread-dough Christmas ornament. Her hair was dyed dark, and she wore an irritating shade of lipstick. When Laura and Eugene entered her apartment, she pelican-walked to the huge television set and snapped it off, mumbling that she thought she had some lemonade in the refrigerator. She spoke in a soft voice with an air of being someone else. Her makeup was hit-and-miss, touched with the faded blue eyeshadow of a baboon. She seemed to drift as she walked with airy vagueness, speaking, whenever she did, as if she were underwater, the result of heavy doses of the Prolixin and Serzone he later found out she self-medicatedly took. Eyestones wondered: *What painting does she remind me of?*

"It's a . . . cozy apartment," he said.

Laura, looking worried, exchanged glances with her mother and, standing up, sought to divert him. "Would you like to look around the town?"

"Don't you want a cold drink?" asked Mrs. Shqumb, walking into the kitchen to rough up an ice-tray. She was poultry-loafed in the arms, he could see, as trying to look charmingly spontaneous she casually bounced fistfuls of ice-cubes into the drinking glasses. She returned and held out two drinks, blinking in the sunlight of the room and gasping slightly as if she had just stepped onto the surface of Uranus and found the air was really methane gas. Eyestones wondered: *Was the painting a Picasso? Or Matisse*? She set down a ceramic aquamarine dish, barnacled with decorative olives, which was filled with hard candy. "Go ahead. Help yourselves." Eyestones looked at Mrs. Shqumb again as

she sat down somewhat wheezily and tried unsuccessfully to grab one fat leg and lift it across the other, pretzelesque. What painting, he wondered, what painting? Then suddenly he knew. One of the *Potato Eaters*! Who was it that once said a balloon is only the successful restraint of an explosion?

"I've got my independence, there's that," said her mother, looking wobbleheadedly about, offering a few sententious remarks about her past life, mainly in reference to her divorce, arranged when Laura got out of high school, the financial burdens of three other mentally retarded daughters, double-yokers whom she intimated had caused that divorce, and finally to a joky and scheming opportunist named Ron ("Let me ask the million dollar question?" "What's that?" "Do you have a million dollars?") who ten years before had jilted her to marry someone else—his third marriage—but whom Mrs. Shqumb still claimed to love. He was a trigamist with a bad heart, but both were hypochondriacs. She worried about TCE in food. She thought of buying a dog. There was also a reference or two to a class-4 Pap smear. Mrs. Shqumb—Edna, she invited Eugene to call her with a sad smile—somewhat vacantly said she had wanted to take up golf, but as he could see, sandbag-heavy in the thighs and utterly out of shape, she was short and plump as a bollard and as muscleless and got winded merely by crossing the kitchen to the living room. She smiled vacantly with that empty, rotund, Spring Byington of a face, puffy with lassitude, and assented that there were other things a person could still do. A church denomination in town attracted her, which met one need. She also had a hobby collecting small picture-frames that sat on display on several tables behind the avocado sofa. She excused herself. She didn't like a lot of clutter in her life, she said over her shoulder, before disappearing upstairs to the bathroom for a moment only to return wearing pavement-colored eyeshadow and new earrings. It was more than apparent after half an hour that Mrs. Shqumb's affection for her daughter was mainly astringent, perhaps because in quoting each other's need for love they mirrored each other's disappointment in the process of both failing to find it.

Mrs. Shqumb had managed to hold a job but shuffled, spoke slowly, and from what she had said spent virtually all her time watching television alone, flipping through magazines, or driving aimlessly on occasion along the Newburyport shore-route. Eugene looked at the buckety woman with her severely tinted coiffure and could only surmise that

she lived in the midst of inner mayhem. He wondered if, like Mr. Fattomale at the office, she was addicted to Ritalin. There was a melancholy spirit about her, an arc of blueness, something missing in the depthless vagary and empty-eyed quality of every move she made, even in the demurrage of crossing a room. She said she liked bowling and same-store spending and growing small cacti. She never went into Boston. She said she stayed home mostly and bought take-out pizza and with inexplicable omnivority read lots of science-fiction paperbacks—books about tough hot-blooded babes with names like Alesha and Zeebo and Klongine and Hubra in brass bras and chain-link bikinis snorting and wielding clubs and broadswords and saving entire kingdoms. A large pile of lurid paperbacks and trashy beach-reads, "shopping and screwing" novels as Discknickers called them, filled an old deal bookcase with titles like *Kiss My Fist, Pit Stop Nympho, Shameless Honeymoon, Sailor's Luck, I Married a Dead Man, Mattress Lunch, Muscle Lover, Tamed Warrioress, Slave Beauty, Glass Dildo, Sheikh of the Desert, Gravity's Rainbow, Nora's Purple Cushion, Provincetown Moon, Drowsy Mall, Dale's Three Husbands, Raoul's Passion, Heroine Hedy*, and *Polly's Millionaire Boob*, stacks of them, all with iridescent covers exclusively written for those forty million women in America on the last frontier of their sex lives.

Laura's father wrote to her from Wampsville, New York, only about twice a year as an excuse for completely ignoring her the rest of the time—brief, tedious, florid letters almost always about himself and confined to his favorite emotion, unassertive regret—subjects mainly ranging from an offer to sell her his old car to retelling the events of a recent skiing trip to Camelback or Killington with his second family to telling her that he was on a short string regarding any visits from her, a constant sub-theme that invariably led to further explanations of how he had only dwindling funds to spread around. But both of her parents were toxic, and she had no better luck with her mother. "*Loar*-a," her mother would sing-songily say in a tranked-out way, "Whad I do with the keys?" She'd teeter slightly, theatrically lowering her head the better to hear the answer. "You upstairs, *Loar*-a, in the bathroom?" She seemed impervious as cork. "*Loar*-a, no mayonnaise, OK? Gives me a hidache." "*Loar*-a, wanna go to T.J. Maxx? They're havin' a white sale." "*Loar*-a, answer that telephone, will ya?" "*Loar*-a, where'd I put that vacuum thing, hose, attachment, *you* know. Can you hear me?" "*Loar-a*, any jelly-beans left in the crystal bowl?" This was everyday stuff, he came to see. Nothing was in the ashes, thought Eugene, that

was not in the log.

They were tightfisted with each other, cheeseparing in small deliberate ways. Laura had failed too much as a daughter for her costive mother to feel she deserved anything worthwhile, certainly not money. Her mother did not want her underfoot and in a way kept her at bay by buying her, and giving, like unspoken criticism, short-money gifts for the flat she hoped her daughter would soon be renting somewhere far away—pillowcases, a desk lamp, a Toast-R-Oven—while Laura grudgingly reciprocated at Christmas with the same parsimonious kind of response, always racing to purchase a gift for her mother on one of the last or next-to-last holiday shopping days, buying something like a fabric bunny or a resin planter or a change-purse or an African violet or an on-sale CD that it turned out she herself had wanted.

Sadly, one was no more a loving mother than the other was a filial daughter—in a hideous and mutual reflection neither wanted motherhood by what each saw in the other—and to that degree with a kind of algebraic symmetry they cancelled each other out, which to one's surprise created a mutual shame-spiral in which ultimately both felt invalidated. Once on the ill-advised cross-country trip that Eugene and Laura took the second summer he knew her, they drove through a series of outlying dorps around Syracuse with names like Munnsville, Marathon, Nedrow, and Skaneateles (pronounced "skinny-atlas") to the area where Laura had been born, wishing the weather away and silently looking at the sad, bovine creatures with zippered mouths and cloth hats from the coal-pockets and ore-docks along the Erie shore and surveying with little joy the rundown houses around the outlying city where a greyness held in the unprepossessing pewter skies above that were darker than Tophet itself. "It rains in this area an average of 166 days a year, snows 109 inches a year," shouted Laura, raising one of her earphones—she was wearing a black T-shirt stating *Get a Taste of Religion! Lick a Witch!* and listening on the highest volume to the Balls singing "Don't Touch Me"—then jumping out of the car she went running to an outside ATM in Wampsville, a grey file-cabinet of a town, where she stood getting soaked and stamping with impatience as it clocked out money into a tray. Eyestones was sadly surprised that she refused to visit her father whom she said lived nearby, complaining that he would not give her any money, seemingly her sole index, or so she seemed to imply, for such a stopover. As they were in the central New York region, they stopped in to see Laura's nutty, illiterate grand-

mother who, symmetrically being out of sorts with *her* very own daughter, Laura's mother, proved with an unalterable and linear consistency the Atreus-like fate of that selfish, unsentimental family. It was awful. Eyestones thought of the cruelty of his own calculating, self-interested brother and his pathetic family. Blood is gossip. The reality of genes was unavoidable. They were all of them connected in hopelessness like a chain of cutout paper dolls, hand to hand to hand. In fact, Mrs. Shqumb once goofily said to him, laughing, "People say we were hit by the same hammer!"

It was clear that Laura's mother had been hoping for the same relief by some sort of romantic *deus ex machina* that her daughter duly expected and for years felt the same muffled hysteria and quiet desperation, with the increasing realization, at least in her case, that it had not happened and probably never would. A year or so afterward, Mrs. Shqumb, bleakly resigned, rather than live by herself, up and married a fat drug-addled, attention-seeking rageaholic named Jasper Radziewicz who was later sentenced to ten years in Attica for trying to brain her with a lug-nut wrench, after which, again with the edgy unmapability characteristic of her, she hooked up with a bankrupt landscaper with Tourette's Syndrome named C. G. Gailors and proceeded to traipse off to a faraway dorp in the tundra called Come by Chance, Newfoundland, leaving behind neither telephone number nor forwarding address, thus assuring for awhile that mother and daughter remain at cross straws. As time passed, Mrs. Shqumb's affection for her daughter asserted itself, not open-endedly but occasionally. The two would meet, usually at Laura's urgency, whenever her mother infrequently returned to the Boston area, simply because as her father saw Laura as a misery package and shut her off, she sought out her mother for help on various fronts with a subtle and terrifying furtiveness. We are not born into a world, merely into a family.

Laura was never even certain whether her mother had married that last man. But would that have accomplished anything of note? Does marriage alienate partners or keep them precariously together, wondered Eyestones—or does the act of marriage serve the purpose of actually keeping those involved away—*away!*—from each other? Could it be the case that like tennis with a net by the interpositioning factor of a barrier, the game can better be played, that two partners, having seen each other's souls, may be spared the misery of being proximate—the pressure, the pain—by the very things that *come between them* such

as guests, dinner parties, children, etc. —the things that actually save married people from each other?

A large nude her daughter had painted—a terrible oil painting, 7-Eleven art, that looked as if it had been not so much commissioned by the Nevada Chamber of Commerce as executed by one of them—hung above a stairway running up to a tight single attic bedroom, her mother's, next to a tiny bathroom with a plastic curtain and bath-mat of washable sky-blue nylon. When Mrs. Shqumb again hobbled off to the bathroom—in the cabinet of which, later, Eugene saw all sorts of bottles, Miltown, Amvical, Modaline, thyroid extract, and Desoxyn in small, out-of-date plastic bottles—Laura went to refill Eugene's glass of lemonade. He looked at her pencil arms. He pitied her. No wonder she was goose meat for brief encounters, suffocatingly needy, observed everywhere with slick opportunists who skidded all over the field like jack rabbits. He dolefully looked about him. A small psychoceramic figurine of a shepherd waved from a table. The enormous television sat in a corner on top of which sat fake flowers in a Pyrex dome through which peeped a figure of an impish German sprite that resembled an homunculus in formaldehyde. The carpet was a symphony of red, mauve, blue, and catlap-yellow concentric circles. A cabinet held three or four glazed shire horses and a cross-eyed china-delicate Alsatian in mid-bark which Mrs. Shqumb said she had bought at a bargain in Schenectady, and draped over the kitchen nook were strung a rosary of bulky glass faux-fishing floats, round and green and dimpled. On top of a cheap bureau was spread an unsorted pile of pennies. On the wall in two early photos of young Laura, both showing her wearing a death-row haircut and on her teenage lip the trace of an Alice B. Toklas mustache, her respective non-smiles and frowns were literally interchangeable, whereas in several more recent photos the weak, etiolated skin of a low-estrogen candidate was in evidence. Was this also a photo, by his ghostly absence, of her father, obviously missing but somehow poignantly there in her scowl that spoke of fights with him in jungle red? Only in another tiny photo in a frame of Laura about eight years old did she seem attractive. It was in this one that she was kept from real beauty only by the brutal ambition in her face. Eyestones would later recall, as he walked from one photo to another, asking himself: *What is all of this about? What am I getting involved in? Where is all this leading?*

There were other framed photographs on the wall of Laura and her loopy sisters, in every one of which, wherein they squinted and

leaked drool, Laura, the oldest, perhaps because of it, leaned sideways, a potential siblicide, slouched and wearing a look of barely disguised distaste in a sort of static lope. She was a tall, quiet, ghostly child in one photo, looking hesitantly to the front with a projected camera nausea and a kind of zombielike self-absorption. It was clear even then that she had learned to hate what a camera could both steal from her privacy and reveal about her mind and soul. Another showed her at about age eight, sulking of course in Mary Jane shoes with several skin-colored Band Aids on her knobby knees and an imitation tortoiseshell barrette slipping down the side of her hair. Still another photograph showed an awkward stork of a girl with a beak of a nose, eyes rimmed red, and a hunch to her shoulders which made her look as if she were wading the marshes in search of a fish. There was a trace of acne like a frail of raisins in her teenage complexion. "I got good grades, for awhile—then I didn't care. They called me cruel names in school like Strange-O and Pinocchio and the Maribou Stork and L-12—you know, stupid times twelve," reluctantly added Laura, daytripper to malady, quickly admitting all of her freak credentials before Eugene could comment on anything, but which he could tell, even as she said it and long before he knew her or could verify it, was a coping mechanism. "Strange-O," she repeated bitterly. "There were other names. Slats. Can-Opener. Bony Macaroni. Fishfinger. Pike. I remember every fucking one. They're in my notebook, see? I write down people's worst faults so I'll never forget their cruelty. Some bitches in my homeroom once passed around to everybody a sheet with a headline that read '101 Ways To Kill Shqumb' and outside they used to play *salucci* with my hat, snatching it off and whipping it around. I can still see their faces." Eugene recognized such savagery, recalling how in Vietnam certain American soldiers, just for the fun of it, would laughingly toss to the small Asian kids running after their trucks burning Sterno pellets that stuck to their fingers and scorched them. Whereas Eugene had once had the impression from previous remarks of hers that Laura's retarded siblings had in a sense given her a certain strength, he now saw that he was mistaken. Laura was maladjusted and frankly not above owning up to it. Once she showed him her high-school yearbook, in which, for want of any real warmth or friendship, everyone had formally written, "Have A Nice Summer," a phrase, among acquaintances, never mind friends, considered in subtext to be the kiss of death, even to the maladjusted. And in high school occurred an incident that she apparently never got over. A

"Cool Book" had been passed around that at one point she had inadvertently intercepted, and on one particular page with her name headlined on it everybody, virtually the entire class, he gathered, had written vicious things about her. It left a memory of bleak disillusion that she carried about her like a cowbell ever since. Her fury slumbered within, but Eugene feared for her, for he gave the name violence to any boldness lying idle and hankering for danger that had never been resolved.

"Can you believe that shit? Can-Opener? Bony Macaroni? Fishfinger? Oh and Paperclip, I forgot." Laura looked over at her mother, who said nothing. "Mother?"

"That's terrible," said Eyestones.

"I called her Miss Demeanor," put in Mrs. Shqumb with a toothy smile, patting her knob of hair as if messing it.

My mother let me do anything I want he heard, the echo of what Laura once told him of her growing up. What Laura took as permissiveness, however, was in fact her mother's bored indifference to her, for Eugene almost immediately came to see that her worries were simply not validated. "Go wash your face, you'll feel better," or "Go, take a long walk," her mother would say whenever she came to her with a problem. There was not a sign of Mr. Shqumb in any of the photographs, and only one or two of his ample wife. One was an older photo of the young mother at summer's end holding an ice-cream cone, a late-Thirties shot in broomstick skirt, peasant blouse, and saddle shoes, her jokey moon-face even at that temporal remove seeming almost accidental on that wall of family melancholy.

The lumpy sofa downstairs was now her transient daughter's kip. That alone made him wonder why she had not turned right around and gone back to California. Just to see Laura there in that godforsaken flat, rail-thin and unhappy, was, as he left, a fact intolerable to ponder. It was a feeling of pity in seeing her that way that became the formal point of departure, at least for him, of their brief liaison. It was pity from the very start. Her mother had made it quite clear that her daughter's stay could only be temporary, retarded dough and breadstick, and it depressed him beyond measure. Laura was a maroon there. A fat idler name Roy who lived down the street had got her mother a "buy" on a computer that had been installed, and when Laura wasn't brooding in one of the small Newburyport cafés she tried to stem her loneliness by e-mailing her few friends back in San Francisco and tapping into odd chat rooms and downloading sexual material in order to cheer

herself up. It was a period when she often wept a good deal, inculcating in Eyestones the belief that spilt tears are not so much about sadness as much as about people cross with themselves. She told Eugene that she wanted to go on a drug named Depakote in order, as she put it, "to get back to reality."

Laura had lived unspectacularly in that small town for the next fourteen or fifteen months doing nothing with her life, going out for breakfast, aimlessly walking through stores in her rubber-thonged sandals, sitting for hours on public benches, and, after having met Eugene that first weekend, taking the opportunity in long telephone calls and confused letters to rabbit on by tapping into work-abroad opportunities and traveling. He would return her calls, trying to keep in touch, but most of the time she would be out, and he would get her answering machine instead, a weird sort of subaquatic voice of hers taking the message. After Laura moved down to Cambridge, as things turned out, it was different, but only different because it got worse.

Eugene had seen it all and often. Laura was never more the hick from Wampsville, New York—where the natives hoping to appear more urbane, at least in their own eyes, always boastfully claimed that they came from Syracuse—than when walking through a Marshall's or a T.J. Maxx or a Filene's Basement with that neurasthenic list of hers, sulkily standing before clothes racks throwing blouses and combinations hither and yon and always somehow ending up buying clothes that were too tight for her, her farcical trousers usually riding high above her ankles and revealing the white socks and clumpy black shoes that gave her the look of Olive Oyl. Eugene would often joke with her that she came from the land of the Iroquois and the Onondaga, where a rude and rustic life in the outdoors was maintained, no frills, no finery, no fuss. And too often no force. At first Laura seemed to be original. To be normal is to be different, Eyestones believed, not average. Diversity to him was a rule of health, where Nature revealed some of her deepest secrets and most profound values through what people smugly called the "abnormal." Stressing the holistic by insisting that the mundane and the holy were inextricably linked, even after getting to know her, he refused to interfere in Laura's life, unless she asked for it, which, not surprisingly, in a kind of weak, nonresistant way, she soon began to do, far too frequently. He resisted her premises. Thought is spontaneous and must be allowed to find its way, and even with encouragement that way she still was never fully in control. Wasn't to tell anyone what to

think the working equivalent of telling her not to think at all?

Eventually Laura proved only irrational and what had initially seemed unique in her to Eyestones proved in the end to be only borderline personality traits. She had no talent for cooking but of course in restaurants acted as if she were a fussy gastronome, spent no money herself but insisted on imported beers whenever offered one, complained of having no money but loathed the idea of going to work. He had neither been mistaken about her blunt paralysis of mind. He had lived with it, had lived *in* it almost. It amazed him that, amid the environing death rattles of her parents' lassitude, she did nothing but simply waited for something not to happen. A mind more indifferent, more self-maiming, more mesmerizingly smug, more indulgently trained to unadmirable excuses, he had never known. She was one of life's nonreactors. She did nothing and was resigned to it—actually watching herself go by. Life seemed a big, buzzing confusion to her. Ask her what she thought about something as banal as the weather, and, pausing as if in deliberation of God-knows-what, she would stare into the middle distance with the button-dead eyes of a hand-puppet and say nothing. Her smile itself was always several pauses delayed. Questions asked of her sat in the air for an eternity, while she looked off—was it brooding?—with a vagueness and abstraction that conveyed absolutely nothing of being alive. It often made him wonder whether she had even heard him speak. Was she partially deaf? *Lauro*, he thought. The bay leaf. Her very ear shape!

Somnambulists find themselves in a curious amnesiac state in which their eyes see, their hands feel, their legs walk, and yet, although all the sensory organs and senses of perception are in full activity, driving what seems an identifiable soul, the actual power of judgment is torpid—partially, if not wholly, obscured.

It took little more than a passing interest in Laura to discover the cynical, defeated witlessness working behind what initially seemed like a decent if hapless and even silly person. Whatever small conversation she was willing at first to share neither obscured nor addressed what thoughts about her character Eugene eventually took to be dead. It was not that she was hiding anything, for who could have been less unprepossessingly well-bred or circumspect or dainty? On the contrary, she was often vulgarly frank, occasionally rude, sometimes insolent, even gross, and a good deal of her act, he eventually saw, was undisguisedly a slick hustle. There was simply a whole absence of a glossary to her.

No key to the door. Was it through volition or unsleeping guile? Was she inscrutable in short or merely secretive? With no shattering revelation but rather a simple kind of cryptoclearance any fool could see, Eugene realized from the first days he spent with her that she was in almost every way the very definition of a dead end, one of those people who would die leaving no more trace of her existence than an oar leaves on water, which not only forced him to try to look for meaning in her but of course had the negative effect of perversely challenging him to try to help her and encouraging him to care. From the viewpoint of her own vanity, having no talent was terrifying—so preemptively, of course, she became an artist—and yet since it was a claim she could not live up to, even approximate by mimicry, for she simply could not draw, it tragically and self-defeatingly forced her into mad, personality aliases and infertile shape-changing that as time passed led to episode after episode of low dodges that, if they at first seemed daring, always and only resulted in mere flight from herself, and neurotic flight at that, an incompetent conjuror's feckless indirection.

One of the shapes of freedom, which is bordered on all sides by isolation, is that, offering us opportunity, it also requires an accounting. What was she going to do? Where was she headed? Why had she no dreams? How did she plan to live? Niobe spilled no more tears than Laura whenever she was with Eugene. To her, his every criticism was cruel, his every suggestion savage. As if to spite him, she never took a step forward from the day they met. That was a decision—a decision to incorporate no values. In a way, it was a revenge against time. Such a revenge, however, invariably involved the self-revision of trying to put herself above the fray, a matter of no small moment in a person who because of her insolvency was virtually a public servant. Poverty forces people out of privacy, maybe its worse curse. Once she moved to Cambridge, she ate in diners, went to movies, hung around record stores, listened to music, maybe took a temporary job once a week. She daily stopped into local thrift shops. Her favorite was a place called the Garment District, a warren of large wooden rooms up a flight of stairs in a rickety old building on Cambridge Street where humorlessly she spent entire afternoons flashing through racks of used blouses, old sweaters, ripped jeans, and usually came away with something like a secondhand purse or cheap bracelet. She would buy collectible records for Eyestones, but, upon sorting through them, after due deliberation keep the valuable ones for herself and then on visits give Eyestones

the others. Aimlessness was her life, and it was a life of fecklessness, discouragement, and cultural kleptomania, week after week of waiting around for free rides, loaned money, bargain clothes, hand-me-down shoes, secondhand bikes, old jackets, recycled mattresses, used books, cheap CDs, borrowed blankets, broken bookshelves, lowered rents, free tickets, stolen goods, fast food, matinee movies, discarded newspapers, and shared bathrooms. The very first time he saw her he knew that she suffered omissions of luxe. But he never knew much until now. Anarchy ruled.

"I have no one to help me," she said. "I don't know anyone."

"What about Curbstepper?"

"Who?"

"The rat-catcher."

"Micepockets? My *landlord?*" Laura sneered. The beak of her long red nose, which in combination with her wide mouth gave her the distinct look of a kestrel, seemed actually to wag. Her high gums showed, pinker against the dark off-register lipsticks she favored. Laura then gave a faux shiver of disdain as if, as an alphaphile, it was only the alpha-male who could win her approval. "He means nothing to me."

"You were seeing him."

She slid him a glance. "Just for coffee," she snapped. She was nettled.

"Are you sure?"

"I don't lie."

"You're certain."

"I do not lie," she lied.

"You call him. He leaves you notes, doesn't he? You seem to be available."

Laura paused, weighing his questions against his interest in her to make an evaluation. "If I weren't, would you be with me?" she inquired cagily, which was typical of her. Eyestones felt his heart tighten. He looked at her. It seemed so deceitful to offer a shapeless assurance that something pleasant was going to happen between them. Every time he answered that question, it was always the same, and in consequence she would carry around a face like a tired sea-boot for days. It is extremely difficult to see someone so disenfranchised flatly rejected, a feeling he recalled having when witnessing one of her many knock-down, drag-out scenes with Warholic, but he knew that in matters of the heart deceit is always death. "Anyway, he left me one note, OK?

My landlord, I'm talking about. I asked him to carry up some things of mine from the cellar. But I don't know why he's any worse than that prick Mutrux," said Laura, "or that dweeb Duxbak or that butt-helmet Little Bob Merkle or Ratnaster with that creepy fucking waldo of his—that mechanical hand. Christ!"

"But that's not the point."

"What?"

"You never listen."

"What do you mean?"

He hesitated. "I've told you before." Putting his hand gently on her arm, Eugene kept on walking. Then he stopped still, comprehending suddenly as they stood there that in reminding him of his own disappointments she made him feel guilty enough to realize she *was* seeing this man.

He whispered, "I'm . . . I'm not in love with you."

Truth. Easiest way to ask, fastest way to know. It was what he neither had nor was able to instill. Fear of the void transformed into voluptuous ignorance, the better to stave off the disappointment of knowing.

"What does that matter?" asked Laura, backing off with a recalcitrant squint. "I need you. I care for you, Mr. Bojangles. I want to be with you. I'm attractive," she pleaded, like Kundry, now taking his arm with a fumbling attempt at intimacy, her seduction strategy specifically calibrated more to Parsifal's innocence than to his stubborn altruism. "Aren't I?" She believed that. Her dripping nose, red and cold, seemed to be wet all the time, and she had that odd bad smell. She was saucy. She was previous and stubborn yet bold. But she had no charm—*l'agrément*—and nothing could reverse it. "Aren't I, Scooby Doo?" she importuned. Contradiction is no more proof of falsehood than the lack of it is an indication of truth, thought Eyestones, and he wanted to tell Laura that, while frankly what she said was not altogether true, he wanted to assure her that in the end it did not matter, that, if facts were contradicted as falsehoods were not, she could still learn to face with open and unvaried confidence what she need not suffer anymore by insisting what she had to be but could not. She was maiming herself even as late as her mid-thirties by insisting that what she could not be, she must, could not do, she try, could not have, she madly hope to possess. Whereas at one time he had encouraged her to study to become a paralegal secretary until he realized that she was not dutiful enough, and to write book reviews until he saw how bad they were—once she

wrote a review of a biography of Christopher Marlowe that, although assigned him by the *Chicago Tribune*, he had subleased to her because she needed the money, and it was hopeless—all that had now changed and he wanted only, prayed, that she come to terms with herself. Is not information defense? Self-knowledge and self-reliance, freedom? A solid glimpse of reality, the beginning of hope?

"My God, it's important that you realize your own dreams," pleaded Eugene, firmly taking her shoulders and turning her toward him. Whenever he finished speaking a sentence, his last word always seemed to hang in the air as if at the height of a fly cast, precisely because she would wait. He looked directly into her eyes. "No one can save anybody else. *Can* he? 'Be ye a lamp unto your own feet.' Buddha's last words."

"What does a lamp have to do with feet?" asked Laura. He looked for irony but saw none. He saw nothing. He deemed it was all of it *about* nothing.

"And Duxbak is not a 'dweeb,'" said Eugene. "It is unworthy of you to say such a thing. Beneath you." He regretted her sharp tongue. Background makes foreground. It's true, he thought, and it seemed to become truer the more he listened to her. Background *is* foreground.

Although she had no car, no money, no ambition, no plan, no sense of order, no humor, now no job, the crucial fact of the matter was she really had *no love to give*, and as far as maturity went she was not on record. Worse for her, she had no solid family to support her. "I am worried about you, can't you see that?" he asked, whose memory tended to look toward the future. "You with Warholic and those issues."

"There's nothing between him and I."

"And me."

"And me," she sighed, correcting herself.

Grammar is not etiquette, but knowledge, he thought.

"You know all the rules," she said with a quack.

"It's a call to deeds, not to dogma," he stated. "What about your own life? A job? A plan? A direction? Anything positive? I mean, even the sun moves 15 degrees an hour! I'm only thinking of your own happiness, your own self-satisfaction."

She did not cry this time, not any longer. She stood there in a codlike trance. The empty, lost, disregarding look she flashed seemed to say she wanted only money, and if that help was not forthcoming, the hell with it. She seemed personally to be driven, reductively, on the two

basic urges of Wall Street: fear and greed. "You seem so . . . insouciant," said Eyestones.

She stiffened angrily all of sudden. "I hate that word," snapped Laura, with a fish-eye squint, her right eyelid lowering with a quiver.

Was it not commonly said that the time to change the roof is when the sun is shining? Eugene quite seriously wanted to say goodbye to her right away and make it stick, but no time seemed ever propitious that would not have at the same time destroyed her by the contemptible whim of his own private convenience, conveyed by the very selfishness that he despised in others, for she was neither balanced nor emotionally strong enough to hear it.

A recent but not unexpected punk affectation in her manner, especially after they had returned from the cross-country trip they had taken together, convinced him, only because he knew her so well, that, because her manner was adopted but not in the way her moods tended to be, she had in all likelihood met another misfit or marginal, doubtless the kind of dopey slacker or high-decibel rocker or erotomaniacal skate-punk that in spite of the fact that she was in her thirties held such fascination for her, the kind of fen-fen popping squid with tats and greasy hair and brains like cobblerock and a mouth wide as a letterbox who, with a crudeness she admired and a fundamental stupidity she could ignore, had provided for her since her early days in middle school such easy, cheap, anarchic thrills. It was reasoning that followed a kind of Pythagorean theorem whereby he realized she had met someone new, not merely because she could not bear to be alone—she had a terror of autonomy—but rather because she had no personality of her own, or at least one she relied on. When she was with anybody who impressed her, she usually tended to become them, adopting, adapting, their subject-interests and even their vocabulary. Why had she no substance herself? he wondered. Wasn't to possess only fictions ultimately to be possessed and the betrayed by them? Playing roles for others, one had to play as few as possible for oneself, but the danger is that one personally disappears. She was always shifting shape. When Eugene asked Laura about meeting someone new, she always hedged. But a foolish smile that she wore after such a question always revealed the truth she couldn't dissemble. Immaturity in anything becomes manifest in self-consciousness. It was curious that Eugene could intuit such a sea change in her whenever it happened by a sudden new taste in music, as it automatically reflected the person she was with, as if a cassette

had literally been shoved into her head. Presence is absence. A point of view, furthermore, is a kind of a trend. One can always take the measurement of the convex by the concave.

"Jobs are for dorks," she said. "I'd rather read 'zines and go to clubs." Laura loved Eugene out of need but despised him out of dependency, the way a person inevitably comes to hate someone she has to need so badly.

"Are you serious?"

"Deal with it."

"You don't want to bother about the subject then, even if they need secretaries at Harvard, as I'm told they do?" Silence. "Like typists?" Silence. "Laura?" "Yeah?" "Why not apply?" "Yeah—like *that*'ll happen," she answered, as she often did, with smart slang, trying to sound like a New Yorker. It was only one of her many affectations. Her out-of-towner need to join, the faux-Manhattanite's vice, had given her not only a speech code but a policy of psychic combat that had expanded to her skewed conception of the real world. "It is so like you to ask me to work for all those trust-fund phonies. Why don't I just get a job selling furniture at Kliptown or bagging groceries at the Food Crypt or waitressing at the Hotel Massachusetts? I'm tired of all those dull, nowhere jobs, OK? Working for peanuts. Pocketing the pay of a sprat." Her mouth, as large as a black grouper's, had the same fat lower lip. "I mean like I'm going to end up another nine-to-fiver? No way."

"Even if you need money?" Didn't Aristotle tell us, reflected Eugene, that an educated person is one who can entertain a thought and not accept it? "I want to help you and always have, but don't you realize that the only jobs you're equipped for are the very jobs you despise?" What *was* she going to end up doing? Living in a dead-end called Babydoll Road wearing white-tassel boots and wind up soliciting in a Combat Zone doorway calling herself something like Bicoastal Rona or Spanish Judy or Double-Harness Julia? Eugene feared her accommodating sloth and the skepticism it bred. With affective detachment went an indifference to terrible fates.

"You know what I'd—"

"I know, I know," she heavily sighed and proceeded sarcastically to quote back his words, "'Fold your hands and say a prayer to Saint Pretzel.'"

It was something of a joke between them.

They crossed like walking morts over the Larz Anderson Bridge

and threaded along a weedy path in the dark between the river and the Harvard Business School with its stately white domes and brick façade. In the dark of night, groups of students passed in twos and threes engaged in low, animated discussion. Laura both hated and envied anyone she identified as spoiled and overadvantaged—she called them "drones" and "propeller-heads"—snobs all of them, at least to her, who galled her with their privilege and wealth and overconfidence, reminding her by default of her own life, of which so far she had spent more than half doing nothing but looking for someone to take care of her and people to criticize.

The cold moon looked empty as a noose. An odor from the river seemed to spread like its dampness into the dark, slouching neighborhood where he lived. When they stopped in front of his house, Laura blinked and pulled at her long nose. "I'm sorry that I still have so much of my stuff here. I appreciate your keeping it for me. Can I pick up my bicycle some time? I could use it."

"Do you want it now?"

She flung back her hair and, smirking coquettishly, took his hand in both of hers. Her hands always seemed cold and freshly damp.

"Can I stay here tonight?"

"I don't think—"

"Just once."

"—we should do that."

Her eyes had the look of rapidly eroding control. "Please?" her voice grew reedily desperate, even frightened, taking on a quavery astral tone. She put her arms around him and searched his face. She pulled him closer to her. Her cheeks felt cold as wet rubber. To him she felt dead and boardy and awkward. "Please?"

Significant pause and oeillade. Eugene thought of his hopes with Rapunzel, of badly wanting to start a clean slate, balefully of all the miseries Laura had caused whenever they had resumed even a friendship, for there was certainly no question of intimacy with her now, not even a thought of it. Once he had seen two sides of Laura Warholic, soon saw four, then eight, suddenly it was Dodecahedronville, and after a while being with her became almost impossible. Not possible. No way.

"Another time." A thought of mercy was tempered with justice. He took off his glasses and held them.

"Please?" she asked, holding him but leaning back and giving him

one of her stupid gelatinous smiles. "Please? I need you, Captain Gingersnaps."

There was a sound in his throat, a hoarse and wordless cry in which a protest lodged: the voice, the vice, of commiseration. Her arms, which felt bat-handle thin, always evoked his pity. She hadn't the cigarette-thinness of a svelte fashion model—it was about boniness and the shrieking underhaul of malangularity. Was it true, as has often been said, that every conceivable human characteristic is a fitness indicator? If so, why did variety persist? A cold nose? Mismatched hips? Hands grasping like cords pulled taut? A mountain of cordwainer's hair framing a small face? Mate choice, fate choice. "Please?" she begged. Eugene hugged her. He closed his eyes. "Just to sleep," he muttered into her hair. When he spoke, his voice was gentle and firm, but he relented as he had a thousand times. He relented as he had in the past. He relented once again, as he knew he should not and never have.

"I'll make it worth your while."

He nodded. "Just to sleep."

X
Sex Questions

Waking up at five o'clock that morning, Eugene was shocked as he came to consciousness to find Laura there in his bed. She lay there unconscious, her hair half-tangled in sleep—she always slept wearing her watch and with socks on in a left-sided strangulated position—occasionally jerking with an involuntary movement. He peered outside. In the early light, mist lay over the river, and it swirled cold over the land as the earth paled. A single crow, glossily black and with knowing eyes, sat glowering at him from a fence. It was always the best time of the day for him, peaceful, with no one stirring. It was to avoid waking his guest that he did not play his Mozart. Eugene fed his cat Nook, watered his cactus, and taking his notebook quietly let himself out and walked over to Monsky's diner, crudely called Totaljew's by everyone for their advertised $2.22 breakfast "special" they offered: two eggs, two slices of toast, two strips of bacon, two coffees, and, more often than not, two bills at the end, at least according to the local customers, because old Mr. Monsky with his hairy face and hideous awn-filled ears not only grumpily charged for butter and jelly but, it was generally believed, the dinner plate as well. A sexy, kittenish waitress there named Creedmore, a Southern girl who was always flirting with Eyestones and virtually everybody else, poured him a cup of coffee and asked, "And wheyah's that li'l ol' claymation pixie this ay-im, your friend with the bow"—*bah-oh*—"tah?" "Duxbak." "Mah, mah, you two do chat *somethin'*." While

Eyestones drank, he flipped open his notebook to review and add to his growing file for future columns.

1. Investigate the sexual aspects of arson, kleptomania, compulsive gambling: are all rape? Consider the cross-referential in sexual matters. Every shoe fetishist is a masochist, according to Magnus Hirschfeld.

2. Sex, like the subject of seasickness or personal feelings, has always been taboo on all Antarctic expeditions. Analyze.

3. Kissing and even holding hands in the cinema in India is never done. Explain. The kiss, plug and socket, is of relatively recent development. It is rarely mentioned in Greek literature, was almost unknown among the lower classes during the Middle Ages, where it was considered a sign of over-refinement, if not prissiness. In the most endearing and ultimately tragic romantic scene in all classical literature, Hector on the Trojan parapet kisses neither his wife Andromache nor his baby Astyanax. Judas's greeting of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane by way of a kiss is particularly obscene and especially traitorous in that it perverts intimacy by the most personal gesture known to man. "A man delights in joining his mouth to that of his beloved in a kiss, not in order to bring himself to any unseemly desire, but because he feels that bond is the opening of mutual access to their souls," wrote Castiglione, for whom a kiss was so sacred in human relations that it symbolized the *termination* of physical contact with them, a last seal of union. Kissing is a sublimation of intercourse, an act of possession, to a degree. "In the intensity of a kiss, our ancient gods of hunger and satisfaction wrestle, they goad one another about the meaning of need. Tongues dart and drag, become bait, lure desire—both to tickle, tantalize, and to sate finally the other's craving," writes Bia Lowe. "You never kiss me," said Laura Warholic in Tennessee on our trip. I told her, "I can only kiss someone with whom I'm in love." She with her misgraffed paraphilias and simplicities for ass-heads—cf. the Craven Slucks—pines for rock stars. Any Orpheus clone. "The riot of the tipsy Bacchanals, tearing the Thracian singer in their rage." And so all fancy-sick she is, and pale of cheer with sighs of love that costs the fresh blood dear, what ponytailed pimp does she now await to dance in circles for? What dunce? And Robin shall restore amends. Wasn't that the very name of the chucklehead Laura worshiped?

Robin Zander of Cheap Trick. Robin Starveling the tailor: "Doth the

moon shine that night we play our play?" What did she say that day in the car as we motored across country? "To me, they invented rock 'n' roll!"

Character is fate.

4. Even thinking about sex can destroy the value of your Hajj, and yet Islam is one of the few religions where sex, along with fantasies of virgins, fountains, shade, etc., is included as one of the rewards of the afterlife. Why is such a paradise reserved only for male believers, as it is? Consider: A Moslim wife who is ignored sexually for four months can initiate an action for divorce.

In Islam, it is *makruh*, or discouraged, to make love standing up—stasivalence—or during the act with one's head or rump facing Mecca.

5. What exactly did Divine mean in John Waters's film *Multiple Maniacs* (1970) by giving a "rosary job"?

6. Every thought of sex, although a basic drive, is lost in both men and women during periods of stress, danger, exhaustion, starvation, etc. Document.

Sex means intimacy, coming close, the familiarity of being able to conquer, perhaps for once and all, the way killing an idol can be a desperate person's way of loving. (Cf. Browning's "My Last Duchess," "Porphyria's Lover," etc.) The permanent moment—a way of saying, "Stop *not* loving me!" Did Mark David Chapman not realize that he shot John Lennon because he was not allowed to be near him, close to him, with him, by his side, any other way? Murder, like sex, is a way of *stabilizing* someone and is in many instances, no question about it, a desperate form of love. Allen Ginsburg even argued that noncoercive pedophilia is not only not harmless but even potentially beneficial—he farcically called it an "exchange of nature bounties." (The Carpocration Gnostics, a libertine sect, believed it right to sin that grace might abound—cf. *felix culpa*.)

7. Why does the term "bachelor" as applied to unmarried males have wild, jovial, and positive connotations, while the word "spinster," which merely denotes an unmarried female, connotes dried-up, old, juiceless? The word "bachelorette" dates only from 1935, an attempt to come up with a more positive term than "spinster," no doubt. Industry knows the negativism of the bad connotation. It is what I call the plum/prune syndrome. Officially, as announced by the Prune Growers of America, prunes are to

be henceforth called "dried plums," as the prune business—thanks to old age and laxative jokes?—is falling off!

Words, words. Chasuble, laughing, never fails to cite as the most insane line in all movies: "'I love you' is such an inadequate way of saying I love you." Joan Crawford in *Possessed* (1947). Does one have to sing the "Ode to Joy"?

8. How do whales mate? Swooping up face to face, as if enormous vases put side to side. Black widow spiders bite off the head of the male after coition. Discuss sex and violence. The Hindu classic known as *Hornahahdatta* contains directions for 417 ways of making love. We can be penetrated like children's sand forts. Are we colanders? (Since Seneca said that human felicity was lodged in the soul, not in the flesh, we seem to be empirically looking, so as to prove him correct!)

N.B.: Ravens bleed from their eyes during coition. Investigate the reason.

9. Menstruation in the Koran is considered an "illness." Misogyny: a staple in religion?

By the way, didn't Otto Weininger assert in his *Sex and Character* that Jewish men have their monthly period? The masculinization of food. Virility fare: oysters, skate, ginseng, dog soup in Korea. Why are fish omitted as fare from Homeric feasts? A feminine association? An olfactory taboo? Too domestic a comestible? Not a community beast to share at table? Warriors ate roasted meats! Blood taboo? Homer also never mentions sauces. Check: why are fish never used as sacrifices in Christ's day?

10. Will the female sex eventually disappear from the earth? *Global Gynecide, or, We Ended the World by Choice*! Now that any pregnant woman can get a sonogram, what of the pending genetic earthquake? Designer children? There are more than four million missing girls in India alone! Parents in Asia all want handsome boys! (Cross-reference neo-naticides! Infanticides! Crib murders! Postpartum lunacy!)

I have often seen women alone, in parked cars, full of sorrow and facing the ocean and crying. Picasso's Dora Maar's Weeping Woman's agonies. Harriet Trombone in tears one afternoon down on the Charles embankment, sitting alone, head down, hugging her knees. A drunk called her a nigger. "Violence is the strength of the weak," she said, prophesying his death. (I believe that before anyone dies he or she always has the lucid

thought he deserves—or non-lucid, he doesn't—to make sense of it.) I took her home for dinner and on my violin played several Schubert lieder for her (she loved the songs from *Winterreise* particularly), which I like to think cheered her up.

She insisted she had the gift of prophecy.

Didn't she mean "premonition"?

11. Are male transvestites men who love women so much they mimic their dress to get even closer to them, or men who because they love their own sex seek to entice them by means of the women's clothes they adopt? *Sartor Resartus*! (Isn't sex only an attempt to try out nakedness, as it were? To do nakedness? To see what nakedness does? To give nakedness a choice?)

What does the social function amount to of the Xaniths of Oman, the Hijras of Northern India, and the Berdaches, male prostitutes of American Indian tribes? An outlet for deviancy? An alternate mating strategy? Need for entertainment? Domestic service (cooks, servants)? Some deep unexplained prelapsarian totem? Flaubert was fascinated with the leering berdaches he saw in Egypt, male dancers in wide trousers, their eyes painted with antimony, and wrote to his friend, Louis Bouilhet on January 15, 1850, "It is too beautiful to be exciting. I doubt whether we shall find the women as good as the men."

12. Is constipation, as is often asserted, a sign of health in Pomeranian dogs? Is sneezing sexual? Is smegma useful for anything?

13. Do the existence of buttocks argue the case for sedentary man? Consider the symmetry of separation, split to solidify, like the philtrum, tongues, chin-bulbs—Cary Grant's looked like a vagina—penis seams, all midline merger-marks or raphes down the center of our bodies. Duality: the illustration of the principle of physics called the "correlation of forces." Is there a metaphorical meaning here for marriage?

14. What of the drone, or male bee, being hatched from an egg that is unpregnated, which in consequence only has one parent? Why do giant pandas have a notoriously weak sex drive? Minks, a strong one? Rabbits, a constant one?

15. To prove a mistake of the Creator, aside from the navel, cannot one

legitimately point to the unhealthy and unholy closeness of women's tripartite lower holes, so prone to infection by their proximity? Isn't another divine mistake the tilt of the earth, which causes by an imbalance of sunshine a dearth of food in nations?

16. Was de Sade correct when he said that the tongue was "the most sensual part of the body"? Glossology linked to erotolabia: chick, piece, tomato, cheesecake, dumpling, dish, morsel, nuts, cherry, tart, dish, etc. The sexist always needs to disembody—diminish?—whom he demeans. Do we need to find flaws in others in order to feel comfortable with them, simply because we never accept ourselves? Who was it that said when you are nobody the only way to be anybody is to be somebody else? Hello, Patricia Highsmith! Marilyn Monroe, our tragic misunderstood goddess, said she could never love a man with perfect teeth. "All the Hollywood and New York Jews were the sharks that killed Norma Jean Baker—agents, magnates, directors, photographers, drama coaches, all those lawyers, dykes, and that one husband. They tore the girl to pieces by bites," says Disc-knickers, referring to his anti-Semitism as his "merry prejudice." He once cavalierly remarked, "I've always believed that women, because they are beautiful, are *not* geniuses." What was the distinction he was making, that a person in his or her vocation in life chooses either to *make* (create) or to *do* (work) and the two never go together?

17. Are women who look at films of men and women making love as part of their own lovemaking with women classifiable as "bisexual"? And if so, is the case the same for heterosexual couples—or self-identified straight men—who watch lesbian pornography, soft-core or hard-core, in order to spice up their own sex lives?

We brainlessly defend the sex we're given. The narcissism of self, the basis of nationalism, the formal cause of war. The ugliest scene in all movies may just be that grotesque moment at Rick's in *Casablanca* where in an angry self-promoting power-struggle the Germans and the French begin angrily singing their national anthems.

18. Is retromingence an ikon of cowardliness?

19. Why wasn't Michelangelo's magnificent eighteen-foot marble sculpture, *David*, a Jew, circumcised? Was it an artistic gaffe? Why is circumcision still performed? Wasn't circumcision originally a propitiatory gesture,

old as boulders, offered by fearful men to placate the angry gods, a public act of cringing and superstitious acquiescence? "We, who do not challenge your sexuality, offer our prepuces," said the castor, cornered, and then bit off his genitals.

N.B. Can it be argued that male circumcision is a human rights violation to be condemned by Amnesty International, which, by the way, *does* protect female circumcision? Confer NORM (National Organization for Restoring Manhood): "Uncircumcised men are less likely to catch STDs, because antibacterial fluids inside the foreskin can kill potential infections. Circumcision can also leave scars and cause the penis to bend when erect. It is a human rights issue," writes R. Wayne Griffiths of NORM. "The inner foreskin has neurovascular sensors designed for sexual enjoyment. U.S. women complain about their men being too rough, but that's what happens when guys can't feel anything."

20. Does couvade imply homosexuality?

21. Only the Gospel of Luke mentions the Blessed Virgin's lineage, the other three gospels having transferred the genealogy to Joseph. But Joseph, according to Christian belief, had no part in the conception of Jesus. How then could Jesus have traced his Davidic ancestry down through Joseph who was *not* his father? Doesn't the long and elaborate genealogy of Joseph as reconstructed in Matthew, which proceeds to outline the descent of Jesus and ending lamely with "Mathew begat Jacob and Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary of whom was born Jesus," come from and go nowhere?

22. Cannot cross-dressing be legitimately defended under the Eighth Commandment?

23. What is behind the vaginal imagery of games, the driving male compulsion to penetrate space and fill holes? Golf, pool, hockey, basketball, football (extra point), soccer, marbles, bowling, archery, darts, baseball (pitching)? (Would that necessarily mean that homosexuals—tilt!—are particular to pinball?)

When the Shulamite sang "My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening" in Song of Songs 5:4, was that figurative usage for fore-play?

24. Advertisement as seduction: wasn't, for example, the 1930s com-

mercial jingle for Lucky Strike cigarettes—"so round, so firm, so fully packed, so quick and easy on draw"—a phallic advertisement? Compile a list of Madison Ave's sexual double entendres. P.S. Are the ovulatory odors or "copulines" of women "advertisements"? Don't they create smell vision? Allow for less attractive women to meet and mate?

Invasion by persuasion: inadequacy is exploited, anxieties plumbed, identities undermined, motives cranked, truth altered... "Suck my breasts," coos Crystalette Eyesickle.

25. Does coprolalia, reaching to a poetic phase, ever fall into the area of creative fiction? Was it because talk *itself*, the corruption of the Word, is so horrendous in matters of adultery that the crime of adultery was officially identified in the 19th century by the term "criminal conversation"?

26. Why of the 282 Laws of Hammurabi written in 1930 B.C. does only one refer to true love?

27. Woman's hypersexuality in dress = a mild form of *reverse rape*, by which a woman arouses unsolicited sexual desire in another person who may not *want* to be aroused. "It always causes some anger, whether recognized or not," according to Ellen Wilson Fielding in the *National Catholic Register* (Aug. 8, 1999). "The evolution of modesty in women requires some initial insight into the male psychology," wrote Pope John Paul II in *Love and Responsibility*.

28. Was Jean Paul Sartre serious when he flatly declared that he preferred croissants to sex?

29. Why is there no existing noun in the English language for a person who commits incest?

Insect? Yes! *Insect! Insect! Insect!*

"My sister, my bride," sings the lover in *Song of Solomon*. What is behind that strange line? The levirate law in Judaism—*levir* means brother-in-law—requires that a childless widow marry the brother of her dead husband. (See the works of Chateaubriand, at the heart of whose work can be found the passionate love of a man for his sister.)

30. How is it that of the thousands he wrote there is not a single love letter written by composer Felix Mendelssohn to his wife, the magnificent

Cecile Jeanrenaud, easily one of the most beautiful women on earth, as can be attested by her portrait by Edouard Magnus in 1836? What if any are the gender differences in writing, playing, even listening to music? Gay men who love show tunes and collect original Broadway cast albums supposedly dislike jazz. Note to self: someday drive down to Provincetown and ask around.

31. In Japan, the most seductive part of a woman is considered to be the back of her neck. In China, the feet are so held, although in Burma the gesture of a person's feet figure in many insults. The prophet Mohammed believed the hand to be the most beautiful part of a woman. It is considered an honor and a privilege in Algeria to be able to wash someone's back, whereas it is held as immodest in India to show one's legs; in the Middle East the face; in the United States, the breast. (What is being said by the fact that Linda Lovelace never reveals her breasts in the 1970s pornographic movie *Deep Throat*?)

What do we know? What do we know?

32. Each child in any given family is raised by different parents. Develop.

33. Although St. Paul or Saul, who was an ordained pharasaic scholar at the time of his sudden conversion, is usually identified as a lifelong celibate, he was a married man—he in fact arguably addresses his wife in one of his letters (Philippians 4:3)—who essentially rebuked people who had withdrawn from their partners out of misunderstood piety.

Isn't the act of a prophet or an apostle or holy man leaving his wife (cf. SS. Peter, Luke, etc.) implicitly anti-family and even misogynistic? By the way, it is possible that St. Paul's vexation alluded to in II Corinthians 12:7 was a lifetime bout of graphophobia? (cf. Galatians 6:11)

Maybe it was his personal hatred of Alexander the metalworker? How we overlook a saint's pusillanimous *fury!* (Grumpy saints = Catherine of Siena, Thomas More, John Vianney, all those early pain-in-ass Christians St. Paul alludes to in his letters who didn't get along—"there is jealousy and quarreling among you.") Didn't the convert Paul learn the forgiveness he claimed to teach? St. Paul: "Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The lord will repay him for what he has done" (II Timothy 4:14). In I Timothy 1:20, Paul even tells us he handed him over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme. How does this correlate with his quite remark-

ably eloquent exhortation on divisons in the church in I Corinthians 3:1-22? Don't we all have nemeses? Marysas, Little Bob Merkle, Warholic, Laura?

34. Should anyone be surprised that the infamous Gilles de Rais, the cruel Bluebeard of legend, torturer, sexual pervert, murderer, had been before his crimes not only a nobleman but one of St. Joan of Arc's lieutenants in her wars against the English? Cruelty and the military impulse are often part of the same destitution.

35. Impotence: what percentage of the thirty million impotent men in the United States have wives who go to bed in hair-curlers and mud packs? Envy = impotence. Criticizing pretty wives and successful women, Laura can't drive nails into a snowbanh. Aren't virtually all the columnists at the *Boston Globe*—mostly failed hacks, parochial nonreaders, and grudging little dunces who envy intelligence in any form—sad eunuchs? Read the anti-intellectual drivel of hack columnists on almost any day for examples. Most reporters would hate Henry James and Tolstoy. The expensive toy in the store window mocks our penury.

N.B. Hemingway once claimed to have dispelled a spell of sexual impotence specifically by fervent prayers in a Catholic church. Comment?

36. The crime of adultery is more than anything the unseen and cowardly act of hypocrisy, lying, and deceit. "What constitutes adultery is *not* the hour which the woman gives her lover, but the night which she afterwards spends with her husband"—George Sand (1804-1876).

37. Aren't airports of all the places in the world the single setting for the most romantic dramas on earth? Notice the tears, the disconsolate goodbyes, the huge welcomes, the aching hugs, the expectations, the shocks, the deep and irrefutable transfigurations of unfettered need virtually made pure of all utility! The tension, the fighting, the pity, the pain. "O remnant on the plain, how long will you cut yourselves?" (Jeremiah 47:5)

Same with train stations, of course. Space always seems threatened by time. The searing tragedy of *Brief Encounter* (1945) starring Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson, which lasts over the course of only four Thursdays.

38. Do men with their ever-changing views ever seriously marry a *wife*? "They marry a woman who is their mother image and then as they grow older, they want a daughter image," says Hedy Lamarr in *Ecstasy*. "Well

moused, Lion!" we repeat in our dreams in midsummer.

39. The opera *Pagliacci* incorporates all the phases of love. N.B.: Every lover on earth in his multiplicity of demands is at one time or another, all at once, Canio, Silvio, and Tonio. A man who is all of the Brothers Karamazov in potency may be none of them in act, however. Any faculty in us always dies when it tolerates truths that exclude it.

40. Why was Herodotus so unkind in his references to the Amazons who lived in the Aegean islands, Ionian coast, and Ephesus? (*Amazone* means "breastless"; exactly how did they burn their breasts off?) Was not part of western fable from its very naissance the dimunition of women? So how was there a renaissance of women? Aristotle, Aquinas, Castiglione all subscribed to the notion of woman as defective man.

41. Why do German women wear their wedding rings on their right hands?

42. Travel writers are almost always unhappily married and are virtually always unfaithful. An ungainsayable law: the quest for something invariably argues dissatisfaction with something else: Explorer Richard Burton exploring odd sexual customs was a sexual athlete; Bruce Chatwin was on a perpetual journey to deny he was gay; Edward Lear was homely, asocial, and quite lonely; Wilfred Thesiger tramped across Arabian deserts in love with Arab boys; etc.

43. Ratnaster in an argument the other day said that all men are acromotophiliacs, lovers of limbless partners, if they pursue women. Genitals = limbs. Judith San Diego: "I despise women who have penis envy! Don't they ever consider their own 'productive space'?"

A woman ugly as egret feet.

But she is correct.

44. What do we say of the provable fact that men are six times likelier than women to be hit by lightning? Why did the women in the Donner Party survive and not the men? Did hatred help some survive? Is a motive a means? Mr. Fattomale, who hated his brother, was so driven to equalizing revenge that he forced his easily intimidated older son, Silvio—a spotty, insincere, deceitful little Blifil with a brandy-glass chin and a reptilian need

to please his father—to hate his uncle as well and to go as far as to write a novel, a bad one, ridiculing him with lies and falsehoods, *and then to pretend he was his friend!*

45. Consider the insignificance of large penises when only the first two inches of the vagina have nerve endings. (So much for the legendary Cerne giant with his 26" phallus.) P.S. Check on compulsive reasons why Ice Age art rarely shows male genitalia but almost always women's. Sexual phalloi in the Old Testament: Moses's staff. Aaron's rod. "He has raised up for his people a horn." (Psalm 148:14). The Clown in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* astutely knew it for an object less for delight than for domination: "Look you, the worm, is not to be trusted but in the keeping of wise people, for, indeed, there is no goodness in the worm." Isn't Nicholas Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* the ultimate cosmotheological bad dream, the hidden persuader that we live in a world that does not run but is governed?

Question: Is the very first mention of the condom to be found in Antoninus Liberalis's *Metamorphoses*?

46. Is the Third World preference for women to have protruding navels, as the Ila men in Zambia do, an aspect of thelerethism, sexual excitement caused by the sight (or touch) of female nipples? Do sexual urges vary from country to country? The Italian highway code prevents French kissing while driving. Why not common bussing? Drives. Males and females are equivalent in no society that was ever formed.

47. A thesis in Philip Wylie's *The Disappearance* (1950), a novel of two worlds, one male, one female—each existing without the opposite sex—points out that women, alone, unlike men, find themselves without a tradition, without experience, without direction, and without confidence, where they desperately resort to "pants parties," dressing like men, clowning, aping, and caricaturing the vanished males.

Misogyny. An attack on fecundity. "We breed with the immoral violence of *fish,*" says one of the characters. (See W.B. Yeat' poem, "On Sailing to Byzantium")

48. Where's the logic of love? Jesus Christ rarely uses the word *love* in the Gospels, and yet he spoke to the Cyro-Phoenician woman, sought out Greeks to teach compassion, and used a Samaritan heretic as an unforget-

table symbol of compassion and love. *Check*: Incidentally, why is David's first wife Michal, the daughter of Saul, the only woman in the entire Hebrew Bible who is explicitly reported to *love* a man?

N.B. How explain that the most unoriginal phrase we can utter to one another is still the thing we most long to hear? "I love you" is always a quotation.

49. Why do models in magazines rarely wear—or show—their wedding rings? To seem available? Virginal? In Japan, every temple has a *maiko,* a temple or vestal virgin. Curiously, in that repressed country sex shops, along with the usual role-playing get-ups (cowgirl costumes, cheerleader costumes, etc.) sell *maiko* costumes for men to buy to give their wives, mistresses, or girlfriends to assume the persona of purity before god-knows-what-kind-of bizarre sexual behavior. The model models. The quiddity of availability. Or is it the syntax of sell? A sociological truism often heard in the dating game: it is much easier to find a partner when you already have one. Ownership intones hooded insinuations. "For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance." (Matthew 25: 29) "The Matthew Principle" has scandalized more people than it has taught. An unfortunate parable. N.B. As dreams are the linchpin of sales, is interest the "offspring" of money?

50. Heiress Barbara Hutton eccentrically called her chamber pot "Belinda," her toilet paper "Clare," and to her an enema was "Mr. Harrison." Who was it that once pointed out that sex, once our taste has been formed, is a self-conscious form of theater? Was Hutton with her characters writing a play? Was L. Frank Baum with *his* characters? Didn't one critic claim that *The Wizard of Oz* was a castration fantasy in which the author himself seeks a heart, a mind, a body? Weird detail in the novel: Toto is unable to bark!

Exactly why?

What is it about crow-life in that story?

51. Gay questions: Why have almost all drama critics in the New York media, print and electronic, been silly simpering gays from the American South? Why, according to lesbian memoirist Elana Dykewomon, do homosexual relationships generally last no more than three months? Why did homosexuality increase after World War I? Why does the pronounced sibilance in gay speech so predominate in millions of men and how does it

reach virtually everywhere without being *taught*? Why is there no equivalence in the speech of gay women?

52. In Yemen, whereas in all parts of the Arabian peninsula there is gender separation, women have actually formed a kind of language that is supposedly completely different from the men's and known only to themselves! (It probably started with a dialect.) Investigate.

53. Sign of the times: those greedy, imperialistic possession-of-soul lyrics in love songs, e.g., "I have only one request of your life / That you spend it with me" ("The Rest of Your Life"); "Love me / That's all I ask of you" ("The Music of the Night" from *The Phantom of the Opera*); "All that I ask of you is love," a song played on the doomed H.M.S. *Titanic*; "That's all I ask of you, honey" ("Take a Chance on Me" by Abba); "I was defeated, you won the war / long as you love me forever more" (Waterloo" by Abba); etc.

Only one request?

That's _all_ I ask?

Long as you love me _forever_ more?

Comment.

54. Anililagnia, the strange sexual attraction experienced by young men for older women, has its counterpart of course in older women lusting after younger men. Laura didn't seem to like my fable, *Queen Gloriana's Revenge* which I told her that night in Gibsonton, Florida. "You always have to add a moral," she complained.

55. Dermatologists are now claiming that women should shave their faces at least weekly in order to stimulate growth hormones, to get rid of unpretty lines to keep their faces smooth by removing old cells. Ask The Krauthammer with her setose chin and bristly eyebrows if she would do it? (On the other hand, don't.)

56. Lipstick was created by the women of ancient Egypt who often specialized in oral sex; to make their lips more inviting, they painted them to resemble their vulvas. Fellatrix as artist. Don't we always borrow from nature? Note: The red gape of fledglings in the nest acts as an irresistible stimulus to the feeding urge of adults.

57. Sheri Martinelli, who had an affair with Ezra Pound, believed in rub-

bing oranges on her skin ("You'll smell like something good to eat") before making love. Necessary? In *The Tall Men* (1955) in reply to a lusty ranchhand's compliment on her perfume, Jane Russell drawls out, "That's not perfume, that's girl." When we were driving across country, Laura said that among specific objects she found sexual, including Arab knives; fur; bananas; museums; hot beach sand; the smell of peat moss; white tennis balls; beeswax; Calandre for men by Paco Rabanne. Lovely scents that Snow used to strew in a bed:

honeysuckle
wild rose
heath
gorse
dying stawberry leaves
peonies
fir wood
flowering lime

58. Why do men who were nursed on bottles instead of a mother's breasts prefer thin, boyish-looking girls and even express repugnance for buxom women?

59. What about the empty vulgarity, never mind the immorality, of strategic "sex chess," slobs and manipulators and nightcrawlers who in order to gain a firmer foothold in society or to gain loot or to further their careers marry up with each successive alliance, with each move trumping or "better dealing" the previous one? Clark Gable, dubbed "The King" in movieland, for example, in the grip of an overwhelming ambition to succeed strategically contracted five marriages from a drama teacher to a socialite in order to advance himself in society and to boost his career. How *unmanly*! The lowest coolie on earth, breaking rocks but loyal to his marriage vows, is infinitely more noble and more masculine. Write an essay.

60. Janet Flanner, the late columnist from Paris for the *New Yorker* and a lesbian, claimed that sapphonics all lived healthier lives because, among other things, they were spared childbirth. (Check on this.) What do we make of the fact that every seven years a woman's body changes? ("Childbearing," said Queen Victoria, "is such a complete violence to all one's feelings of propriety which God knows receive a shock enough in marriage alone.")

61. The gap in a person's front teeth is held as extremely attractive in the Middle East. Many Egyptian actors, singers, and dancers, such as Omar Sharif, Hani Shaker, and Ms. Fatan Hamama, among others, show this highly identifiable feature. In the physiological or aesthetic world, however, we generally associate the condition with a kind of rustic stupidity and irreducible bumpkinism. Needless to say, not always. Examples are many and varied: Darryl Zanuck, Amelia Earhart, Ernest Borgnine, Pete Rose, Vince Lombardi, Robert Morse, Terry Thomas, Elton John, Dr. Josef Mengele, James Baldwin, Eartha Kitt, George Formby, Lauren Hutton, Alfred E. Newman, Condoleeza Rice, Joseph Cotton, John Ashbery. et alii. For some peculiar reason, it is not uncommon for people to have it cosmetically done. It has an ethnic reality to it, a village solidity, and in certain parts of the world it is considered *baladi*, "country" = بلدي

It was of course a feature found lascivious (peasant-like?) in Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

62. Correlate Freud's basic assertion that the "struggle for existence" was anti-libidinous insofar as it necessitates the regimentation of the instinct by a constraining reality principle to Tolstoy's spiritually held belief that labor is the only proof of love. When we work we sacrifice, so when we sacrifice we love, no? *Ore et labore*. It recapitulates St. Teresa of Avila's entire theology. One often struggles to have existence alone revenge one's self. What of the men and women who neurotically want a child so that they can treat it as they feel they should have been treated when they were small? Does it not veto affection?

63. Scientist Nikolo Tesla, who never married, hated women for wearing pearls around their necks, as he felt that they gave off a "terrible energy." What exactly was the nature of that phobia and did it relate to his genius?

64. "Samoans rate romantic fidelity in terms of days or weeks at most, and are inclined to scoff at tales of life-long devotion," wrote Margaret Mead in *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). Now contested by anthropologist Derek Freeman, pointing out that Mead in her twenties was too young either to notice or too naive to comprehend the complexity of their deeper—and often troubled—inner lives. Palusami, taro root, etc.—they eat fattening foods and find size attractive. I once knew a Peace Corps worker who lived there, acquaintance from another lifetime, whose sympathies for

them extended to growing as restlessly fat.

65. Are the differences of corpus (shape, size, facial intensity, etc.) on Crucifixes from country to country sociologically diagnostic? Study.

66. Greta Garbo, the silver screen's paradigm of beauty, said she was afraid of sex and never felt fulfilled after the act. Was her extreme adoration of her father involved in this? Is eonism involved in father-love? Did Hemingway, Rilke, and Oscar Wilde come to fear women because they had been dressed in female clothing in their childhoods?

67. Abu al-'Ala al-Ma'arri's *The Epistle of the Penitent*, an 11th-century Arabic work, is often as bawdy and as wonderfully earthy as the *Arabian Nights*, which is almost an erotikon. The dominant Arabic powers have only become puritanical in the 20th century. Do an article on the pendulum swing of the open, then closed society, proving an age of censorship almost always follows an age of license. (60s hippies becoming parents in the 70s were strict as hell with their kids and many of them became pious reactionaries.)

68. Women, curiously, unlike men, can detect genetic compatibility by smell. (Their reaction to the smell of androsterone increases at ovulation.) Genetic compatibility makes a suitor's smell pleasing. Modern colognes actually destroy the capacity to determine feelings. We dampen ardor! Who was it that once declared the reason people sweat in passion is so they won't catch fire making love?

Smellprints: passcards.

69. Sexual euphemisms: A woman's hair having come undone is the classic metonymy-cum-symbol, a staple in literature and film. In film, blowing curtains, crashing waves, a train rushing along. In the Victorian novel, the climatological often provides commentary. Lovers coming in from the rain, ongoing storms, often nightfall itself taking place. When Trollope's young lovers meet on bridges or by fast-moving streams, as Victoria Glendenning points out, the water's power and fluidity plainly mirror the force of unspoken sexual desire. (Cf. Mary Belton in *The Belton Estate*.) I believe in the 19th-century novel the heat of fox-hunting, pursuit and climax, is often the pre-occasion or post-occasion of sex.

70. St. Mark, with his characteristic omission of details, says nothing of the virtue (vice?) of someone loving one's neighbor *more* than oneself! But wasn't Christ's redemption based precisely on that?

71. My early fears and horrors were all literary—analyze—but were they sexual?

a. Gulliver's hair being tied down by the Lilliputians
b. Magua's terrifying face
c. the word *maelström* (Poe's black water)
d. Injun Joe dead in the dark cave
e. the staircaselessness in *Kidnapped*
f. Huck Finn's pap
g. the *delayed* appearance of Ahab
h. Blind Pew, groping, in N. C. Wyeth's drawing
i. the "speckled band" in Sherlock Holmes

72. Signs of the times: Shirley Temple's movies: she hugs old men, flirts with daddy-surrogates and asks them to marry her, dances for male audiences, jauntily walks off with strangers, and kisses virtually anybody except the blonde hussy who tries to take her away in *Susannah of the Mounties*, a movie in which, at 8 years old, she falls in love with Randolph Scott, paws him, waits on him, sits in his lap, and pouts at one point: "I thought if you love someone, you married him." We live today in total mistrust, cynicism, jaded corruption, and political correctness where making such a movie would be not so much condemned as impossible to make. In a way, little Shirley's innocence is more normal than present-day suspicion.

73. "There were four people in our marriage," wrote dancer Ruth St.Denis who was married to gay Ted Shawn, "and the male in me and the female in Ted were just as alive and demanding as we ourselves." Why didn't the genders pair off?

74. Sex before marriage in Vietnam is called "eating rice before the bell." What bell?

XI
Monsieur Détraques

"Ah, *Herr Warum*! Mr. Why!" exclaimed Warholic, greeting Eugene Eyestones at the office with a note of booming effusiveness as he scraped his chair backwards and splayed out his legs. He wiped his mouth and with a burp, set aside a large white take-out carton of cheese bagelach from which he was eating. Shoving his hands into his trousers he farted. He was crude. And tasteless. Eyestones remembered once seeing him wolfing down crab-legs from a pile of them on his chest like an otter. He wore a big gold Jewish *chai* on a chain, in matted chest-hair. He loved Las Vegas and, as if to prove it with a consimility of fancy, was wearing Sans-a-Belt slacks, white shoes, and an open white shirt like a legislator at the Knesset. He got up out of his chair, effortfully for his fatness—there was always that trace of urinous scent about him—tilting slightly forward of his center of gravity as he stood with his double-chin tucked in as if he were fighting not only an incipient burp but taking a negative survey of Eyestones at the same time. "The Love Burglar!"

It was Sunday afternoon, and, although the main building was deserted but for the San Diegos and a few others, the editor had stopped by the office, although he rarely had anywhere else to go, to discuss a crisis. It was a drab and undistinguished room with orange Arizona Windsor chairs, a few serviceable plants, and on the far wall a tableau of the city of Jerusalem nailed out in tin. Mutrux, the attorney, was in

attendance, always a bad sign. He had known the Warholics in San Francisco, and Eyestones from the first had heard the rumor that he had once been involved with Laura, departing from just exactly what line of conduct in that misalliance, a given with lawyers, he could not say. Knowing, however, that she had cagily inveigled her way into Eyestones's life, Mutrux always sardonically nodded at him whenever her name came up, almost always as a prelude to some highly colored tale or other about her—gossip—that he wanted to convey but coyly might not. Mutrux had a square, sawed-off head with straps of dark hair fastidiously swept over to one side, manifesting the fop's endless concern about head-to-back-hair ratio. His raptor's eyes, which were hooded above and pouched below, gave his face a look both defiant and one madly eager to impart bad news. He seemed whenever he looked at you continuously to be counting, weighing, surveying, measuring with a slow, grim smile that cut into his face like a wound. Whenever he did speak, his words were clipped with cold authority, sharp stunts of strong opinion, like the sound of iron bolts being drawn.

Warholic was in a black mood, after having heard burglarious noises when he let himself in. Unbeknownst to him, Little Bob Merkle, who was often looting the office four ways from Sunday, had come by earlier to nobble a few tins of wax floor polish and had just managed to disappear. Muskrat and Squishy, the two sex-weasels who boarded with Warholic and generally did his bidding in exchange for God knows what, had accompanied the fat man downtown and were about to leave for work, stripping in the Combat Zone. Two whores. The Solent and the Swale. Squishy, the taller one, had the dark, beetling, moronic stare of a coalmine pony, and her dull, smudge-colored eyes, gazing straight ahead, seemed in an artificial way ready to click, like dolls' eyelids. Warholic, as out-of-shape as a candlepin bowler, trying to cross his legs, almost fell, and cursed, scaring Muskrat who, jerking up, burnt her nose trying to light a cigarette. "Want us to wait in the fwah-yay?" asked Squishy.

"'Vestibule' in Boston," muttered Chasuble who, wearing a foulard secured by an expensive harlequin opal pin, was just breezing through to drop off a copy of his new movie review. He called Eyestones aside. "Do you like my pin? Rudy Nureyev added a lovely ice-white faux *bijou* to Solor's turban in his very first *Bayadère*." He fluttered his eyelids. "So I should do less?"

"Why are you dressed up?"

"Oh, I've been over to see Kisling's *Portrait of a Boy* on loan at the Fogg, for which I try to look good," he declared, beaming. "*Mon beau mousse d'aventure*, my cabin boy of adventure. Bougereauté in style, but modern." Whispering, he quoted,

> "'Enfant d'honneur si beau couronné de lilas!
> Penche-toi sur mon lit, laisse ma queue qui monte
> Frapper ta joue dorée. Écoute, il te raconte,
> Ton amant l'assassin, sa geste en mille éclats.'

Saint Genet, *mon patron*! Well, now it's back over the bridge for me. I belong to a marvelous filmwatcher's club in Cambridge, and I'm off to see Vera Hruba Ralston—on *skates*, mind you!—in *Murder in the Music Hall*."

A mad filmgoer, Chasuble memorized entire episodes from favorite movies and loved to dish about Hollywood and knew all sorts of Tinseltown gossip like Merle Oberon having had bad skin and Lucille Ball always noisily dissing the concept of marriage and Telly Savalas having had half a finger and Gabby Hayes having been an expert on wine and Bing Crosby's penchant for wearing hats in order to avoid wearing his toupee and Gloria Swanson hating sugar and Forrest Tucker having a big wang. He was always singing in imitation of tenor James Melton and doing old Eric Blore and Edward Everett Horton bits and Franklin Pangborn scenes and quoting in a shaky, dramatic, semidemiquavering Kate Hepburn-voice her famous line as Teddy Kendall, "The calla lilies are in bloom again."

"Where's your handbag?" asked Muskrat.

"I'll trouble you to scram," said Chasuble.

"How do you say the word *gum* in Pig Latin?" chipped in Squishy with a scrawl of mockery in her eye.

"If either of you ever give birth, and I do hear there *are* laws against littering," replied Chasuble, eyes haughtily closed, "the only possible offspring would be a cube!" He straightened a cuff, sniffed, and, shaking Eugene Eyestones's sleeve, whispered, "Love ya, mean it, gotta go."

Mutrux said, "He's taking his poodle."

"You mean his buddy board!" chimed in Muskrat and Squishy together, doubled-over and both cackling loudly at the same moment like the snap of a sheet. Warholic then went into a laughing fit which in

turn made him sneeze which caused him to start whooping and splattering droplets everywhere which sobered him. "Get me a coffee!" he ordered. "And a cold seltzer! I got heartburn like you wouldn't believe from some *kneidlach*." He was always slurping up borscht and schav and noodle-kugel and pickled fish and knubblewurst and babka. Muskrat, who had a red jewel in a front left tooth and fake vampire fangs, shook her huge breasts at Eyestones as she went went out to get Warholic's drink. So much make-up was caked on her lewd, painted face that it looked distinctly die-cut, almost separate in composition from her short body. She smoothed down her long breasts as she passed Eugene, fingering his neck as she passed, and asked, "Want some strange?"

"Put your fangs in upside-down and bite your head off," snarled Warholic, but the gesture he made as if to swing at her his fatness made next to impossible. "Is there anything more to eat out there?" he shouted. "Why?" asked Squishy. "Why? Why," he asked. "Why do seagulls never get wet? Why are women named Alexandra dorks? Why do all pigs sleep on their right sides? Why do Japs like things that come in sets of three or four pieces? Why do Gentiles buy ugly toothbrushes? Why do grapes and raisins kill cats and dogs? Why did Bo Diddley use a square guitar? Why will snuff execute a snake? Because I'm still hungry — start there!" He scratched a gratin of acne on his neck, loudly slurped up the last of his cheese bagelach, and threw the carton aside. It was not attractive. *Le Debauche et la Mort son deux aimables filles*, Eyestones heard Baudelaire whisper from somewhere in the far beyond.

"When we consider all the reasons why we should bounce you here," wheezed the fat, gibbering supremo, yanking up a pile of back issues of *Quink* and searching for several in particular with a fat wet thumb, flashing through copy after copy, "I would explain it's because you aid and abet my skeezy ex, the Blowpipe! Devil Girl! The Cum Dumpster! Motorhole! That mouth-breathing hairbag over there in that ugly little *schmudl* of a walk-up over on River Street with roaches till Tuesday and curtains you shouldn't wrap your garbage in!" Warholic blew his nose in G-flat major. "Sit down."

"She has no money, no friends, no looks, no car, no prospects, and no savings," replied Eugene, who recalled Laura having told him how in a San Francisco bar one night in a drunken moment of white fury he had shoved her off a barstool. He could easily believe it.

"Bullshit," said Warholic.

"Worse, no hope."

"I should care."

"Just a bit."

"Hey, write it down and mail it to yesterday, OK?"

Eyestones sat down. It was through the process of sheer, uninterrupted talking that Warholic kept reality or his own version of it both together and at bay. But to almost everyone else his horn-swoggling, honey-fugling, double-shuffling front masked an even deeper, more violent personality that was always ready to surface. There was something in his crassness that always reminded Eugene of his hateful brother Marysas, who always covertly took the newspaper underneath, tried to reuse stamps, pepped-up on magazine at stands so he would not have to buy them, farmed local swap shops at various dumps, and was full of so much secrecy and guile and cross-pollinated ambition that no one could keep track of it all. He was on his third crazy and run-down wife whom he was always roasting with logic in fussy exasperation and whom he preferred to keep unkempt and insecure, the more easily to dominate her. Hopelessly longwinded, he spoke in endless paragraphs and whenever anybody else tried to get a word in, offending him, his face would fall and he would sag with frustration, his narrow nates theatrically collapsing. He was flinty and unavailable to his three or four children but in bizarre attempts to save face—for with a huge inflated ego he also had a messianic need to seem generous—compulsively invited people to dinners he would suddenly cancel within days with all sorts of ad-libbed pretense and alarm, dinners he would try to re-arrange with dissembling speed but would then again *also* cancel, shape-changing tricks the shallowness of which Eyestones had long since seen through but who would never have eaten with him in the first place because he believed in the wisdom of Proverbs 15:17.

"What she does have is big brass balls, OK?" Warholic barked, slamming down his fist on the desk like a mad boanthrop. "She is as fake as a hooker's tits. You with your narrowly Biblicistic compassion choose to feel the opposite. But all her wide-eyed basset-unctuous hand-kneading pleas for help are stage-acting." He picked up a couple of issues of *Quink*, each paper-clipped open, and, sliding them forward, sat back and began to throw a couple of paper clips into a cup: *pok*, *pok*. "I couldn't give a zebra's hairy ass that she is servicing half the male population of Greater Boston, including from what I hear some eightball, a spade, Malverse the monkey, a Negro-with-a-javelin, some sub-Saharan raccoon, offshoot of the potto, a fuzzy-haired primate, a gooky Sri

Lankan nittaewo in a flat hat! *My concern is money*!" He bellowed with ear-banging expletives all in that loud, one-way overtrumping voice of his that no one could ever interrupt. "What she owes me! Do you know what she is up to now?" *Pok. Pok*: two more clips. "Demanding I repay her $500! Claims that back in San Francisco I squirreled out of a bunch of old phone bills!" *Pok. Pok.* "Blames me for all her troubles, the hairy *mieskeit*! The fucking *shmendrick*!" He crossly snapped a paperclip in two and sat there tense with disgust, a mat of sweat dampening his skull, glistening on the roll of banana flesh behind his moist ears. "Anyway, what about this piece? We spent three consecutive issues on the subject—to what good?"

He pointed to the issues of *Quink* each thrown open to Eyestones's article. "The phones are still ringing. NOW members want you dead. In the light of all the nonsense I've had to put up with, civic, religious, and political, I should shutter the magazine and send all of you out to beg!" *Pok.* "A bunch of assholes over at Harvard are screaming like banshees to have a public debate with you in Sanders Theater, how about that one? Your articles, which were too long in the first place, never mind inflammatory, have raised a bigger shit-storm than your charge that the AIDS virus was released during irresponsible birth control experiments in third world countries by American pharmaceutical companies!"

Eyestones said nothing.

"I bring this up to you who now knows from nothing?" squawked Warholic. "*Nisht geshtoigen, nisht gefloigen*!"

Warholic shot his cuffs and snatched at his sleeves in anticipation of a new delivery, as Muskrat, flashing her smiling jewel, set down a take-out bowl of chicken-livers and a bulkie, throwing down a plastic spoon. When the editor began eating, chewing, snorting with plosives and growling bite upon bite, it sounded exactly like someone changing a tire. He farted again. "And of course they haven't paid off every last senator and rep in Congress, so we're all safe, right?"

Eyestones shook his head. "Although of course the virus has always been out there, there is no question that it was the pharmaceutical companies! Secret experiments back in the early Sixties with birth-control doses! Secretly using human guinea pigs in poor outbacks like Haiti and Zaire, Third World countries with no political power! Destroying the immune systems of entire black populations! It is the worst cover-up of the century! Were there 'adjuvants' in those doses, toxic substances that

make vaccines more effective by stimulating an even stronger response from the immune system than a virus or bacterium might on its own? Or were the doses too high or low? No one yet knows. What's clear is that the epidemic, the disease, began there and spread. They are the ones who are responsible."

"Ever hear of antibiotics," cracked Judith San Diego, scowling at him with a stress-induced vertical line between her untweezed eyebrows. She was one of those whippet-thin workaholics—with short legs and the large head of a Colorpoint cat—who bragged about needing only four hours of sleep a night. She was wearing almost as a threat a black formless dress that looked as if it had been cut from zinc. She yanked the leash on an old angry mutt, Holman, who was dripping saliva and yelping in several directions and trying to bite Squishy.

"Ignore him," muttered her husband, Jim. The San Diegos had always hated Eyestones. Jim, a uxorious and chinless little herbert with a cowlick, who, although he always claimed to be a good Catholic, had never forgiven Eyestones whose approval he had always wanted, when soliciting his advice about a second marriage several years before—"And who was his first wife," asked Discknickers when he first saw Judith, "Beast 666?"—Eyestones had simply shrugged and said, "He who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Matthew 19:9."

"A plague is loose, don't you understand? What good can antibiotics do? Antibiotics have no effect on a virus," said Eyestones. He had been pointing this out for years. "I have no doubt that with their Rappaccini-like experiments, the pharmaceutical companies are also responsible for the horror in the Ebola hot zone—a bio-safety level-4 hot agent!—the most dangerous virus on the planet. It is an epidemic, a raging forest fire, now being spread by heterosexual sex. In Africa, twenty-five million people are infected with AIDS and more than two million each year are dying from the virus. No, it's the pharmaceuts."

"So we almost get sued?"

Warholic came out with a laugh like a gasping halibut.

"*Sued!*" he repeated.

"But didn't," answered Eyestones quietly, "and wouldn't because the companies, stifling the controversy, didn't want to invite the public attention. And don't. As to the matter of that attention, I have only one question: Anyone in America for campaign-finance reform? I was once engaged to a woman, a graduate of MIT with an interest in statistics, who, after her parents' divorce because her father turned out to

be gay, in a fit of altruism trotted off to take a job at one of those big pharmaceutical companies in Connecticut, 'to help,' as she deludedly put it, 'try to find a cure for AIDS'—a situation I would compare to one of the Three Little Pigs going off to give dental hygiene to the Big Bad Wolf."

"So my mazel is you do it again with this I-should-get-a-stomach-cramp *farshtunken* of a piece? You want I choke and die?" added Warholic, his apelike face gaving back a cracked sneer, as he pondered down-to-the-wire funding formulas. "Wotan the Supergangster by whom I mean Discknickers tells me we lost three or four accounts from it? Oh please, no, do not start with hilarious tales about an increase in subscriptions! Not when we have lost moon-sized assloads of advertising, with remnant space we're now forced to sell at a discount. *Gevalt*! And with our already low CPM?" He snarled at the San Diegos to go get the books. "You are a fucking *luftmensch*, Mr. Eyestones, with your head up in the clouds, but, mark my words—*zolst es shtipin in toches!*—you are destined to suffer for your softness! You are weak! Meantime, I'm getting trimmed because I consider us a failure if we lose a dime!" He closed his mouth around that one monosyllabic word as if he were sealing it in a vault. "A dime!" he snorted. "I go and give all of you brain-potatoes free rein to go walking around here to say what you want, every fucking Joe Meatball and Sally Handjob in the house, and what happens?—what horseshit!—my very own people go out and start frame-grabbing! I know that pig-hearted right-wing hypocrite Discknickers applauds every catastrophe that comes my way. But I'm supposed to stand by and let some streamlined fucking *shtunk* try to prevail over my ass? Some hateful *shtarker*? Even Mr. Fattomale has already weighed in with two nasty television commentaries or don't you happen to remember? I heard some goy the other day at lunch in Chidorigafuchi's refer to you as 'Monsieur Détraques'! What does that mean?" He checked to see that the San Diegos were out of earshot. "Jim San Diego here and his midget wife, the ugly flea from Kankakee, suggest we sue you and, as I say, want you jobbed." *Pok.* "And your comment is—"

"Why?"

"*Why*?" snorted Warholic, with his big rubber-tire mouth and dent-corn teeth and large rolling eyes that opened his face like a moonpie. "Why do Jews love jewelry? Why do red windows discourage flies? Why do candy wrappers make noise? Why does the letter *i* have a dot?

Why can't scorpions swim? Why do croutons come in airtight packages when they're already stale? Why do fat people always look smug eating ice cream? Why are there multicolored clouds on the planet Jupiter? Why do tapirs piss in the very water they drink? Why do all EKGs look like they're written," he spat, "in Arabic? Why did Alice B. Toklas have a mustache? Why had redskins no beards? Why didn't they wear hats in the Roman republic? Why is running across the backs of cows a rite of passage in Ethiopia? Why couldn't Mickey Mantle hit a high-and-tight fastball? Why do only 27 percent of Americans own passports? Why did your Jesus Christ hop around on a rubber crutch? Why have I just eaten a plate of lox and fourteen matzo balls with a sandwich of schmaltz herring?"

"We should ignore them."

He stroked his nose. "Ignore them?"

"Disregard. Overlook," said Eyestones. "Neglect to pay attention."

And forego publicity? thought cunning Warholic, who stood up and began pacing. Eyestones, who had learned to ignore any report that came through the manifestly strabismic eyes of the editor, remembered his having called in the San Diegos when the story broke and how officious little Jim had come whipping into the room, dog-snouted and rabid, exclaiming with flabulating arms that it was bad for everybody all around to pretend nothing had happened. Now Jim was back again in the same room making the same point. Suddenly, his sharp-nosed wife re-appeared, as Warholic hissed under his breath, "*Rechielesnitseh*!" "It's a libel, all of it!" screamed Judith, a harridan who was short as a pig's trotter and even shorter than their sad fat son Abe, who, moping about, had aimlessly followed her into the room. She flew at her son, marching him out of the room by grabbing his ear with a brutalizing hop-hop-hop. A woman mean as she was ugly—she had that repellent "stuck-on-one-look" of a bad face-lift—she returned, flung down a stack of papers, and, beadily glaring at Eyestones, while following her weak husband's ventriloquial strategy that alone gave their marriage definition, pointed a sharp finger at him and hysterically barked, "It is a libel on all womankind, you shitstick!"

"And you would know?" said Mutrux to Judith in her dress of killed steel.

"You need psychiatric help!"

"You need hormone replacement therapy! Vitamin E! Red clover! Black cohosh! Dong quai! Or why not try soy sauce? Right, Eugene?

I've heard it has done wonders for Japanese women with menopausal symptoms."

"I'll claw your face off," said Judith to Mutrux, infuriated that her son who had been in an anteroom typing labels for *Quink*'s subscribers cretinously kept getting his small fat fingers stuck between the keys rapping out endless lines of gobbledygook—*SHS16Jooly01Sweetiest-woALT*—only to keep shoving his face back in through the door and harassing her by furiously snapping, "*Sh-sh-shutup, muvver*!"

Mutrux swiveled quickly to remark in a low voice to Eyestones, "How did After Birth ever get so small?" Eugene trying to change the focus earnestly responded by saying, "Did you know that Dutch women once fasted after the seventh month of pregnancy in order to keep their babies small?"

"And as f-for you, favver," screeched Abe like a dry drill, "go s-suck on a g-gaspipe!"

Poor Abe, who in hating both of his parents had his reasons, basically natal ones, for not only having been born a cross between Tom Thumb and the Intermission Elf of old drive-in movie legend fame but for having to go through life as one of the most facially unfavored creatures on the planet. He shone, oilily, and never blinked. With a head as long as a pschent, he was a tub of butter, a cephalopod, what Warholic called a *shlump*—short, fat, shapeless, and hairy. No wonder he was generally referred to in the office as None of the Above.

"Get him out of here!" screamed Judith who had a grating voice and the nasal honk of a badly played oboe. She stood there with one hand on her hip in indignation and the other stabbing an accusatory forefinger at her husband, a scolding position that among office wits had earned her the soubriquet The Teapot, along with other names. All the while Holman the dog was barking and straining the leash. "The dog?" asked her husband. Came the merciless response, "*Both* dogs!" *List while I woo thee with sweet melody*, thought Eyestones as the San Diegos stood there bickering at each other. The lower she could make him crawl, the taller she stood.

"What a lovely marriage," said Mutrux.

Eyestones said, "Haven't you heard of the ancient symbiosis that exists between ant and fungus, which depend on each other for survival?"

At that moment, Mr. Fattomale, who when walking into the office virtually stumbled over Judith San Diego, looked down and said, "You

look gorgeous. I never get tired of seeing you in that dress, Buckyball." It was another nickname for her there, along with the Duchess of Pleats, *La Trou de Jaloux*, Stuckey, and Pussywillow. "Sit on it!" snapped Judith with that tin machine voice, her scary hair blunt upon her shoulders. As soon as Jim San Diego put Abe into the other room, he came bowling through the door again. This time Judith, who began stamping her feet, could have been dancing in front of a storm lantern, lifting her arms and legs in such a cartoon tantrum she could have been doing the Freddy.

"I'm beginning to h-hate your wife," screamed Abe, spitting and bouncing up and down in front of his father in an almost deranged rumplestiltskinian fit.

"What's your problem, get up on the wrong side of the *web* this morning?" asked Mr. Fattomale of half-mad Judith. "Go spank your monkey!" spat the little grig, her pre-Cambrian eyes hideous and spiky-looking, and, cross as two sticks, she went racing over to Abe in one impatient stride, and, grabbing his ears like lifting a bunny, began swinging him, pushing him, stumbling after him, pushing him, stumbling after him, swinging him, and finally marching him out in a series of hysterical hops and bounces, she slammed shut the door and bellowed, "*I'm going to kill you, igloo balls*!"

Mickey Warholic shuffling his large body around the room as if he were looking for a place to sleep finally dropped into his creaking chair. He gathered up the issues of *Quink* containing the serialized essay, which upon publication had scandalized just about everybody and become the *rondo capriccioso* of feminist complaints, long television commentaries, a spate of articles, local talk shows, school classrooms, big forum debates, domestic fistfights, a notable *Boston* magazine cover—run by the editors there in the hope of increasing its readership to more than 150—several impromptu seminars, lots of city-wide gossip, even a demonstration or two, and no end of "letters to the editor" in the *Boston Globe*, laughable oxymoron, one of the most parochial newspapers in the country. "I want you to take one last look at this essay of yours, which is as long as a PBS pledge drive," barked the editor, irritatedly shaking the change in his pocket. He stood up. "You're a sharp trader, see, a *tsaylem kop*, but we've got a problem here and have some decisions to make about it, mister man."

"What do you mean?"

"Aside from the fact that I'm getting flack—"

"Look—"

"—overexploding cell-phones and foreboding bell-tones and overloading hell-moans, do you hear, which is costing me advertising money! Cash!" he barked angrily, virtually interrupting himself as he infuriatingly raced on, inconsiderately and impatiently rushing over the voices of all the other people as usual like a growling lawnmower over a patch of insignificant weeds. "I'm going to be sued! There are real living pople named in these pages. For that, I don't give a shit. If it's a slapstick slide of dirty dishes on the dowagers, all to the good! They are a bunch of putty-chinned God-botherers and self-important, forefinger-wagging civic jogtrotters and hopelessly neurotic What-Hath-God-Wrought-Now apologists, but they are still part of the Public Domain. So I say stick it to all those interfering kluppers in the church, Protestant *or* Catholic, including the pope with his red velvet slippers, all those cruel nuns with their ice-cold vulvas, and Father Motherway, Keeper of the Happy Ending, and all his diocesan child-molesters, OK?" His face became taut. "But now you gotta find and name, specifically bracket here, all the places in it where my ex-wife Laura with her ugly *punim*, Christ bite her, can sue me, see? No bullshit, now. I can read between the lines. I'm not a fucking *schmendrick* already, E^2. I know it's a portrait of her in a convex mirror. Flag the places where I'm going to get fucked!"

Ironically, it was indeed Laura Warholic with her vivid want of artistic talent and prevaricating reasons for doing nothing in the way of art who had inadvertently given Eyestones his idea for writing the controversial article in the first place, just as she had done for the long telegony piece he had written. As a matter of fact, she who had spent four full years in art school and had graduated, although she insisted on repeatedly trying to do so, could not draw water. Why would she waste her life trying to do something for which she had no gifts? He had merely tried to answer his own question. He had written the long piece with Assyrian speed and efficiency. But what specifically had he revealed of her in a libelous or vicious way? Or as an identifiable entity? Was it so transparent, as her blustering former husband averred—and specifically *where?*—it was Laura?

Eyestones sat down to read it.

XII

The Controversial Essay

A creative woman is an oxymoron. A woman who creates is, in fact, an anomaly, in spite of the fact that in many instances she may do it far better than a man and in the result display even genius. It is not that women *cannot* create; they can. Sybils, the priestesses of Delphi, Bourignon, Joanna Southcott, Jeanne de la Motte-Guyon, Saint Teresa of Avila, Mercy Otis Warren. Simone Weil, Ann Radcliffe. Emily Dickinson. Virginia Woolf. Sigrid Undset. Louise Imogen Guiney. Edith Sitwell. Madame de Sevigné. Jane Austen. Willa Cather. Ingeborg Bachmann. Rebecca West. Carson McCullers. Djuna Barnes. Jean Rhys, Patricia Highsmith. All brilliant. George Eliot, the Brontë sisters, Edith Wharton are nearly matchless as novelists. Painters Artemisia Gentileschi, Elisabetta Sirani, Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, Angelica Kauffmann, Alice Neel, Mary Cassatt, Rosa Bonheur, Cecilia Beaux, Gwen John. They are all on board. The unavoidable fact remains, nevertheless, that in the act of "making," a woman is never quite comfortably adjusted and in the act of doing so must in a elemental and self-confronting way not only face but also challenge her own psychobiology, step outside the boundaries of gynecology, reach beyond her singular gender in order to do so. Why has there been no female Leonardo, no Giorgione, no Titian? Where is their Isaac Newton, their Christopher Wren? Where is the Shakespeare of their sex? Their Milton? Bach? Or Brahms? How respond to the common charge that down through history, women who would presume to create have been damaged and rendered in-

effective by competitive and dismissive males, social stigmas, the pressure of inane laws, traditional mores, and neurotic self-sabotage? A subtle and elemental law interposes to guide the plow. The truth is neither awful nor, I would submit, ingenious or pejorative. Simply, in that a woman can house and have a baby, it may be argued, she is predetermined that much and by that ratio to abstain from creating in any other way. I would like to address, along with the difficulty in art of the self-assertion of women, the necessity of self-assertion for the artist in general. It is important not to forget that the strategy of modern feminism, angered by such theories, is to remain on the offensive in order to conceal the lack of coherent ideology, which is perhaps why what may seem like a controversial subject, but in fact is not, is almost always—whether honestly or not—avoided as a defense. As I. M. Pei said, "Function keeps an architect from being a sculptor."

The natural capacity for women to have a child, a creative act, biologically, aesthetically, and morally, makes gratuitous, almost irrelevant, any act they may choose—an extra effort, I insist, is involved—or take up in the matter of sculpting, painting, composing music, writing poetry or prose, even philosophizing, although in particular instances, as I say, this is not only constantly done by women, but often done well, even expertly. A woman who creates, nevertheless, is a woman inhabiting another beatitude: she has not so much to repudiate her womanhood in the conjuring of creation as much as overcome it, for because every single cell in a woman's body holds the DNA to bear and house and nurture a child, which is in a very real sense the ultimate creation, it can simultaneously render the lesser, extraphysical act of making or creating art not so much stupendously difficult for her as, almost always—from her point of view—quite specifically pointless. Better ask a circular sunflower on a sunny day to sing a psalm! At birth, a woman has as many as one to two million eggs in her ovaries; at the age of puberty, by a natural process known as *atresia*, she will have lost 300,000 eggs. With every single menstrual cycle, *a thousand* more eggs will die. And motherhood to her is thus not significant? Did you know that a fetus's presence persists in every mother's cell? That every cell of hers is a mosaic of every child she ever had? We do not even know why! The biological capacity to bear a child—every woman's natural right of course and theoretically each woman's biological option—is so powerful a force for her on every level, in the potency of it if not in the very act, an amazing *rite de passage* that in many if not most instances actually and alone validates her as a woman, that it goes against the basic necessity itself of painting, sculpting, composing, writing, etc., simply because such accomplishments

are by definition—have become—gratuitous acts. And difficult. Often impossible. Mere desire is not enough. The map is not the territory. Nature beautifully defines the profound ontological siguificance of motherhood from beginning to end for a woman in the way the act of childbirth mimics and recapitulates in an almost perfect one-to-one correspondence, stage by stage, her reactions during sex:

Childbirth	Sexual Excitement
heavy breathing	heavy breathing
grunts	grunts
physical strain	physical strain
loss of veneer of refinement	loss of self-consciousness
contracting uterus	rhythmic uterine contractions
legs wide apart	legs wide apart
aenesthetical to pain	insensitive to roughness
return of the sensory	return of the sensory

The reason that the sexual nature of breast-feeding has often scandalized many women—Masters and Johnson reported that many mothers over the years have flatly refused to breast-feed their babies after discovering that it is pleasurable—is that women almost congenitally adhere to the principles of nature and not to the perversion of it. It is to their credit, indeed, that women are shocked in diverging from natural laws.

A woman essentially does not need to create, for she *embodies* creation, in the very way nature itself does with the growth and renewal and fertility of the continuing seasons. Irrecuperably embedded in a woman is nature's driving impulse to create. She is, in a very real sense, the essence of vital creation, its acme, its flowering, but yet the strong biological imperative within her also renders art, at least regarding her natural impulse to make it, irrelevant. Simone de Beauvoir believed that women actually lack the capacity for the "transcendence" of biology and not only are not but have never been socialized into interiority. Down through the ages, it is the single sex who with blessed assurance of self-contentment fully understood its own mercies and maternities and has been able to thrive. Why lately has it become so aggrieved, so strident, so hostile to itself? Moods change, time passes, there is no moral evolution.

It is an ontological problem nevertheless. To be without identity is indeed to be without humanity. The question of identity involves individuality.

Eugene specifically recalled when that very idea of woman's discontent emerged in his mind, although he had long been thinking of it. On their long trip together across the country, Laura Warholic, with chronic self-sabotage, spitefully X'ed out a bad pencil drawing she had begun of an Amish hay barn and with an imprecation threw it into the road, with utter relief.

Lonely twentieth-century man, exhausted but still having to face an endless mass of disconnected, partial, and unrelated information, perhaps enervated by the very scientific multitasking by which he came to *see* his dilemma, soon found something else inexplicably odd. A mate problem. Women for entire millennia, with certain notable exceptions, have been not so much content to ponder the ineffable beauty and supreme blessedness in the possibility of maternal creativity as much as delighted to enjoy the experience. What therefore took place in the collective unconscious to bring about the winter of their discontent? Was a new age aborning, peopled by a different kind of woman suddenly? Were they spiritually bankrupt? Tired of sex taboos? Badly patronized? Overwhelmed by theoretical fallacies? Underwhelmed by male weakness? Seduced by alternative adventure? Infected with some new irrationality? "With reason suffering a partial discredit," wrote Donald Barthelme in one of his essays, "Worrying About Women," "with science increasingly suspect, there is a turning toward other ways of knowing, the non-rational, the 'feminine,' feeling-with. Women chose this moment to mobilize." Was a new egalitarian zeitgeist in transit that allowed this? New possibilities of assertiveness? The dance to selve? The yearning to create? Quite startling was the sudden realization that formulating art, under the pretext of being equal with men, as women see it, made dangerous inroads into an old identity, for just as creativity, men's way of giving birth, may ultimately mean more to them than women do—"I love Mickey Mouse more than any woman I've ever met," Walt Disney once famously pronounced—being a mother, at least in terms of nature, it may be argued, provides a woman's most significant personal realization. A bipolar war goes on within them, however, and that is where a binary becomes irony. Just as we must remember that the goddess Kali is the great paradoxical mother of both life and death—she who gives birth to life by that very definition and in that very act also gives life to death—it is my argument that a woman by being brought to childbed instinctively dies to the ambition of art. I believe that, even though fulfilled, she must inevitably face the irreconcilable fact that hers is a creation neither by the hand nor

of the heart, which is a different vision entirely than what may broadly be called *making*. There is no question we have had brilliant women artists, creators conquering realm after realm. By simple grit and determination, beyond that, many a woman can mime—fake—the creative morph, fashioning things of the craft-and-hobby sort, simply to try to appropriate the artist-identity, but let her look to what she makes if what is produced has such low origins. We have seen bright suns, then, and lesser lights. There are truths to know: (1) Every creative act does not act out creation. (2) Every traveler journeys to a place not shown on a map and reports back from a location known only to him—or herself, as Pico Iyer wisely once observed. And (3) birdsong is squabbling.

Perpetuation of the race depends on a continual, successful, and reinfusing biology, *pace* the modern feminists and their shrill, man-hating methods of the past, of which at the present time there is more than a small trace. "Modern women have gained control of their fertility, only to destroy it," writes Susan Faludi, coming directly to the point. "They have pursued their own professional dream—and lost out on the greatest female adventure," by which she means childbearing. This added pressure of biological responsibility is as old as the human race. It is all there on the map of racial survival. Men who have remained inexorably the fighters, knights, and warriors in history have been conditioned that way quite simply because men as a sex are disposable, dispensable, and quite depressingly unnecessary in their large numbers, whereas women have to be protected to keep the race going. Our planet can casually afford to lose men. Wars remind us of that, along with the male love of war: that achingly dumb, indefensible, and repeated compulsion to crow and to snarl, to challenge, to fight. It is the incubators alone that matter. A single male can literally inseminate a hundred, indeed a thousand women. Man as a member of the superfluous gender, just as much as he needs to be a creator, can freely *afford* to be one, can afford to feel the psychic freedom, that is, to conceptualize what he is, decide what he wants to make, needs to fashion, yearns to see, hopes to realize. A man who creates is nothing less than a man seeking to prove himself valuable, worthwhile, acceptable, but also validated. Women in Scripture, as well as in many if not most countries today, achieve honor and prestige proudly but often solely by the act of giving birth, which is why even Lot's daughters, who would have been held as pariahs had they been barren, were willing to go so far as to lie with their father in order to conceive, and so put paid to the notion they were worthless. Imagine the desperation of having to choose incest as morally prefer-

able to the "disgrace" of infertility! The syndrome is itself a symptom.

Consider in Scripture the desperate game of sexual checkers, only one example of many that take place, by which cunning Tamar, contriving every bargain for maternity (Genesis 38:18), became the mother of twins—surely less a symbol of fertility than of over-reaching—by replacing wicked Er, seed-wasting Onan, and Shelah as well as seducing her father-in-law Judah in the guise of a "prostitute." Anything to avoid being barren! She shows no shame! And is it mere chance that in a later Old Testament drama (II Samuel 13:14) another woman of that very same name, Tamar, is sexually attacked by Amnon, Absalom's brother, a person who is just as scheming as she is, after which she is coldly sent away to remain desolate and barren, a corporal punishment for a woman that is not only totally desolate-making but the repudiation of everything she is?

"Metaphysics, metaphysics," muttered Warholic all of a sudden, and from an impertinency born less of momentary attraction than simple mistrust that one of his two tarts might be fondly watching Eugene Eyestones, with catamorphic force he shouted aloud for a another cup of coffee.

Men are by definition barren. It is not enough for them by impregnating a woman to feel the full force of creation. It is interpreted for fathers like the crude waving semaphore of a translated aboriginal language. They can feel directly neither the true astonishment nor the asperity of their baby's birth. They serve merely as conduits through which genes travel between females. In their childless state they seek to create, almost as an existence-assertion, in order to define themselves by dint of the physical acts of making—creating something—which, at least in somatic or biological terms, they can otherwise never personally realize. A man for his fulfillment therefore has to *mean*. It is in my opinion the drive in the male to seek meaning—for who would deny that the act of creation in the end is epistemological?—is that which makes art. As the quest for maleness is the quest to selve, the quest to selve in turn is invariably the very starting point of creation. The vitality of *making* has its direct source in the barrenness the male seeks to avoid, for that barrenness of which we have spoken exacts a cost. As males cannot identify with their mothers, it is their primary task in growing up, an obligation, a labor learned with difficulty, *to be not feminine*. The male who is unable to identify with his mother quickly discovers that he is also left out of a female world in which with her

daughters she is so much at home. Given the uncertain, shadowy status of his masculinity, the male must fight to create an identity for himself, establishing rigid and regardable differences between what is male and what is female. He can have no "complacencies of the peignoir." He must confirm and secure those differences, distance himself from that suffocating maternal sphere at all costs, and establish against the mother's incorporating power a specific maleness. The sense of autonomy he finds takes on a wider affirmation. A need for identity has grown, as it were, out of a biological law. A male cannot be "not something." What he needs to be without question manifests in what he has to say. The existential act of becoming something becomes the linchpin of his art, what psychologist and feminist Nancy Chodorow would refer to in another context as the "reproduction of mothering." Men do not follow the templates of nature. Nature, which like Mother Earth is the transvaluing mother of all values, knows more than men, and men quickly and compulsively fear it: "the plainness of plain things is savagery," wrote Wallace Stevens. Unlike nature, men who do not follow the rise and fall of the seasons are abrupt, slanted, cantankerously urgent, unrealistic, challenged by vigor, and are impatient with the concept of easy fluctuation. Men seek to control, to vitiate, to tame, to *unseat* nature. They are dogged and pragmatic, and have *to do*. The distych holds true that has them pegged, above all, as makers:

> Masculine will always be
> Things that you can touch and see.

Men are linear, not cyclic like women, and loathe repetition. There is rarely an easy passage in men from mood to mood. Their impatience becomes intense in the over-reflective pauses that question the value of adventure. They are obtuse, nonverbal, extreme, selfish, geniuses for untransformed habits, objective, mistrustful of emotion, and most of them tend to tire of hints, orders, suggestions and soft knowledge. These are generalizations of course, but it is the general we are looking at. Men are vastly different from women. They read for instruction, for philosophy, ideas, history, not necessarily for solutions. They tend, often, not to think feelings have to lead to something. Talk is for women the *sine qua non* of being awake. Men are willing to talk, but not to you. When they do listen, they tend not to look at women and in conversation are inclined to drop the subject or confine it and refuse to search admirations that do not jibe with their dreams of the coming of consciousness. They liquidate their insuffi-

ciency by pursuing their detours. They are driven by freedom even to die.

Eyestones recognized here the referencing accuracy to Laura Warholic and made a note. In the mere sentences he read he acutely felt the climate of exhaustion in having been with her and the atony and lack of vital energy and collapse of those days that informed their being together.

Women often align the act of listening to love: men do not. Compromise is not their first gift, if it is their gift at all. Nothing is ever accomplished by reasonable men, or so they are convinced, and so men can become immensely and often maddeningly impractical, in the course of which, however, by getting out of the rhythms and rote of the diurnal, common climate, they learn to invent and to discover and to vibrate and to shine and of course to lie and to deceive and to flee. There is magic, an almost encyclocinematic insight, that arrows out of this madness. Men are solar: women are lunar, not so much open to as part of mystery. A woman merely has to be. A male is driven to make. Men nurture in order to have impact. Women achieve in order to nurture. Both work, very hard. No question about it. Men must also nurture, as women must also achieve. Men who tend to want to be separate, independent, and free in order to create—unencumbered—look to be completed by subduing the world through invention. Women look to be completed by relationships, consensus-building, interdependence. Women in the extreme tend to fix on the private and personal, whereas men tend to focus on the spare, the wonderful, and the strange, even the figmental. "Idiocy ['private person,' Greek] is the female defect: intent on their private lives, women follow their fate through a darkness deep as that cast by malformed cells in the brain," Rebecca West astutely observed in *Black Lamb & Grey Falcon*. "It is no worse than the male defect, which is lunacy. They are so obsessed by public affairs that they see the world as by moonlight, which shows the outlines of every object but not the details indicative of their nature." It is as if two halves of a whole obdurately refuse to be anything other while yet both give definition to a unity. Women are constantly taken to be normally and naturally sexual. (When men read smut, it is pornography; when women do, it is called erotica.) A woman for her power of childbearing has the inestimable capacity to make within herself, can *feel* the art, as it were, can house it, hear it, deliver it. Then she can hold it. She can nurture it. While women are of course as fully competent to succeed in the world as men are—perhaps even more so, for their

competitive and purse-pinching sense of realism (the main reason that the contumacious H. L. Mencken offered as the primary reason for the distaff ability to write great novels)—their natural instinct to get married and to bear children undermines and frankly, one might even add, relieves them of their need to create. The expression "creative woman," in that she can bear a child, is a tautology, in short. Resentment, however, in a powerfully creative and determined woman can often rise up in what she has to fight in herself, when at the same time she nobly may decide to write novels, compose symphonies, make paintings, etc., almost as if she discovers a bifurcation of mind and body that, subverting the very essence of what she is, what she can do, what she needs to do, forces her to have to face her own doppelgänger in herself. It can often be a terrible epiphany for her.

"We're waiting! *I'm* waiting," declared Warholic, his laughter almost a punctuation. He snickered and prankishly nudging Squishy with his elbow asked Eyestones, "Have you got to the part yet where you prove by calculus that women are eggplants that farmers hoe?"

"Being born a woman is my awful tragedy," wrote Sylvia Plath. "From the moment I was conceived I was doomed to sport breasts and ovaries rather than penis and scrotum." Under such circumstances, women must often repress their own abilities to fit the scope of their spouses or mates or lovers and keep them flattered and content. May I suggest that in doing so, they often have chiefly themselves to combat. ("All artists are half man and half woman, and the woman is insufferable," said Pablo Picasso.) Women's basic drive is to yield and give in to their nature, which is the whole point of Ruth Suckow's novel *Cora* (1929), but is it their *desire*? "Getting married is something you win?" gasped Ms. Terry O'Neill, a VP of the National Organization of Women, regarding a television show in 2001 in which fifty single women competed to marry a millionaire. "It's extremely creepy," O'Neill exclaimed. Woman is essentially nature. With her fluctuating estrogen levels, which we know almost arithmetically imitate the changing seasons, she is, like nature, fickle but fecund, mercurial but motherly, one day filling you with love, the next day killing you with the storms of penalty and pain and passion, which to my mind is why Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well: "Go, call your husband and come here" (John 4:16). It is not the mysterious line scholars make it to be: Christ simply wants to speak to the *ratio*, the head of the house. Whether seen by presentists as fair or unfair, women for their nature are seen in the biblical world as generic. The

Bible pointedly excises them from genealogies. Why is it that Jesus, acting almost always out of women's requests—Mary's, say, regarding Lazarus—specifically raised small daughters and women from the dead? They were the "outsiders," the ignored, the weaker sex who most needed his help! There is only one women mentioned by name in the Koran. Is that not of consequence? It may be hard doctrine to hear but surely when Saint Paul proclaimed that "It is a good thing for a man to have nothing to do with a woman" (I Corinthians 7:1), he was not only suggesting that men rise above their own natural urges, and I daresay Nature itself, but was also vigorously leading us to that famous caveat of his mentioned in the same epistle, regarding their incapacities, when he says, "Women must not address meetings," adding dogmatically that "if they wanted to know something, they should ask their husbands at home" (14:34-35). Is this misogynistic? Whether one agrees or disagrees, Plato in his *Symposium* unequivocally, and one rather wants to believe hyperbolically, states through the mouth of Pausanias that women are incapable of creative activity above the physical—did he mean sexual?—level. Surely Plato after millennia found his companionate bookend in Mr. William S. Burroughs, who believed out of who-knows-what peculiar misogyny that the genius for sex and fascination for love was "a fraud perpetuated by the female sex."

Nature never flags. Forests grow out of lava. Trees reseal over hacked and butchered limbs. Creatures flourish down in the depths of the abyssal benthic ooze. In *The Flesh and the Devil*, iconically, the Countess Rhaden (Garbo), a married woman, has a mad affair with Leo (John Gilbert) who then murders her husband in a duel and is subsequently banished to Africa for five years, which is of course far too long for the countess to wait, and so she remarries, this time taking as her spouse Leo's best friend, which lasts until Leo returns, whereupon following her natural instincts she pursues her lover once again! Women in their music expressly celebrate only themselves. They rise perpetually above even the melody of their decomposition, forever alive, perpetually ongoing. Eternal.

Man, clearly, is driven to create as a means of facing his sterility. I would even argue that it is the very autistic stir in and from his emptiness that specifically creates art, that sparks and ignites the galvanizing drive that makes it magic. Does this sound so strange? Salvador Dalí, who loathed being touched—he was a compulsive masturbator—offered the unique theory that impotence was, in fact, the *sine qua non* of great creative achievement. "All the great people who realize sensational achievements is impotent," he once said, following his own special grammar and extravagant cross-

linguistic patterns and illiteracies, pointing out that sexual impotency is directly connected to creative genius. "Napoleon, everybody le people who is not impotent, make childs embrions, and no more. But immediately find le sex work with extreme difficulty, you create fantastic music, architecture, and invasions, imperial invasions."

"Poorly put," said Eyestones, taking off his eyeglasses and wiping his eyes. He substituted them with a pair of green spectacles that he occasionally used, like Auguste Dupin, to ease his eyes and improve his vision.

"Keep reading," prompted Warholic impatiently, "and tell me, will you, why I should have a headache like you wouldn't believe and heartburn till Wednesday?" He yawned. "Muskrat, you, get me a seltzer, will you?" He popped his eyes. "*Now* already, for chrissakes! We got no *hamantashen*? So on the shelf there, hand me that there carton of cold sour chewy soup."

Women tend to go in one steady direction: men who need to "selve" are desperately omnidirectional, caught up in a cavalcade of high-end development by which they hope to find their definition. Women labor reproductively and men do not. What is the job of creating a poem, a painting, or a pavanne compared to a person resonating with the power to give birth? How trivial must it seem for a fertile woman, ransacking the placement of her transactional memories for whatever reason, to want to "make"? To feel, falsely, she has to make? To need to? To have to approach with suppositionless disregard the mystery of making? The furor male artists must make to flog their dreams—pseudo-confessions, long strategies, ingenuities, all the minutious nights of insomnia ripped from their befuddled need to fill, so to speak, their own "wombs"—makes in the driving need for art something from which women can with easy grace be blessedly free!

Why has there been down through history such a predominance by and proliferation of artistic men over artistic women, such a comparative paucity of women artists, thinkers, inventors, philosophers, poets, novelists? It is simply because in their natural state of fecundity, whether it is realized or not, experienced in actuality or felt in potential, women have seen for centuries that they need not *prove* to others what they already know of themselves. To contradict Simone de Beauvoir, a woman is born a woman and does not have to become one. A woman thinks of creation in the way that piety has a certain knowledge of evil as its prerequisite, not out of

false prudence but rather out of a certain fear of betraying what she is. George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to cite but three writers, all made their sorties into art out of the paradoxically aesthetic strategy by way of subject matter of *renouncing* art and aesthetic ambition. In order to "make," Emily Dickinson even went so far as to reflect—to feel she had to reject—in self-abnegating renunciation the very concept of womanliness. "God keep me from what they call *household*," she wrote, satirically,

> She rose to His Requirement—dropt
> The Playthings of Her Life
> To take the honorable Work
> Of Woman, and of Wife—
>
> If ought She missed in Her new Day
> Of Amplitude, or Awe—
> Or First Prospective—or the Gold
> In using, wear away,
>
> It lay unmentioned—as the Sea
> Develop Pearl, and Weed,
> But only to Himself—be known
> The Fathoms they abide.

Significantly, Dickinson always referred to the dark hallway that led to her writing room as the "Northwest Passage"—she knew all about the John Franklin Expedition—as if she were a pioneer on a strange and intrepid *male* adventure.

Psychologically speaking, all women are artists; biologically speaking, in fact, all women have the potency to be. But potency is not act. It is by any metaphysical definition non-act. As a matter of fact, it may be confidently asserted that having the potency to pursue art may in the lax and lazy and limerent mind remain alone sufficient in itself to do exactly *nothing* about it, killing any drive to create, in the same way, for example, that thought is the enemy of action. (Women's refusal to admit that they have the time to create is pathetic—a feigned indifference that, to my mind, has its parallel in the compulsive macho insistence by men on the day before Christmas, almost always a lie, that they have done no shopping. Men love to shop.) Motherhood alone is arguably impetus enough to satisy a woman's cre-

ative urge. Of a talent for art in them left unexplored or unpursued? The habit of not creating has, over the years and by evolution, no doubt taken its toll. The loss of wings through disuse illustrates the widespread fallacy that evolution always means progress. At least as often it means degeneration, as, for example, with the firefly or glowworm the female of which is wingless or perhaps with the Mottled Umber butterfly in which species because of the winglessness of the female only males can migrate. Cicadas are commonly cited in literature for their song, but it is only the males that possess it. Coincidence?

"There is another thing I love about pregnancy. For as long as I can remember," confessed Joyce Maynard in *At Home in the World*, "I have awakened every morning with an oppressive awareness of my obligation to create something worthwhile. As young as age six or seven, I have gone to sleep every night with the question, 'What did I write today? What did I make that will matter?' Now I am making a baby. I don't need to write a word, and still I'm accomplishing the most important thing."

Feminist Germaine Greer has declared straight out, "No woman can be fulfilled unless she is a mother." Motherhood, before anything else, defines a woman, has for over three thousand years provided a woman with her central attention. It stood in its full glory as equal to and surely a creative analogue or correlative to man's public and/or cultural commitments. It is her exclusive domain. "I think *all* genetic decisions should be made by women," declares Nobel Prize-winning James D. Watson, discoverer of the DNA molecule, "not the state, not their husbands, just by women, because they're going to give birth to those children, and they're going to be the ones responsible." In the *Aeneid*, Lavinia, Aeneas's respectable wife, unlike poor Dido, is the only woman in this major epic, the mother of all future Romans, who significantly does not utter a single word. She does not need to. Her meaning—her full identity—is her motherhood. On the three occasions when she does appear, she modestly casts her eyes down and even blushes with maidenly shyness. For centuries in England and in Europe wives were often referred to as "Mother." The unavoidable fact is that woman is above all *mother* power. It is her radiance. The unique, irreplaceable creation of life is woven from her substance, part and parcel of her being. She is gynecologically willing to accept death in order to bring forth her child. She is the person who in her very flesh prepares the human to endure to eternity, the brave centrality to all living things.

What of the virgin or the infertile woman? The prophet encourages the childless or unmarried woman to find an alternate creativity—see Isaiah

54:1-2—for just as her Maker is her husband, what she in turn makes can fill her life and be her glory. We read, "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child! Burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor." It is nothing less than an emancipation proclamation.

It is clear that women in their noncreativity tend to betray and subvert themselves, whether they have become mothers or not. Most of the time when they are childless and yet at the same time in a desperate need to create something, anything, but cannot, or do not, or will not, it is not only wounding but gives rise to all that self-hypnotic, New Age, sadly unrepleneshing "saviorspeak:" "I'm taking control of my life," "I want some me time," "I'm worth it," "I need to do something for me," etc. They themselves in their self-pampering rhetoric become the baby they do not have. Such ego-driven expressions are all feeble if understandable attempts at cheering themselves up, and of course who can be surprised at the need to cheer oneself up when you feel that you are existentially canceled as an artist? Have you ever noticed how so many women are obsessed with food and fat instead of with growth, wholeness, autonomy, creativity? It is not a natural concern, this modern fixation—obsession—with slenderness. It is a displacement activity. Women who attempt as a lifelong vocation to be slim, young, and attractive are almost to a one women without a single serious thought in their heads—Wallis Simpson, the Duchess of Windsor; Nancy Reagan; Jane Fonda; Babe Paley; pick any model, pick any moron—are women who are driven by the need to avoid the padded maternal destiny that in their parochial minds leaves them susceptible to poverty, hunger, and abandonment. Female thinness is a form of male imposture in which women are ultimately trying to look like boys or men: lean, muscular, strong, competitive, or in other instances, paradoxically, tiny, unthreatening, daddy's little girl. It is not only a flight from responsibility but an aspect of avarice. Grotesquely, the hopefulness of motherhood in many women is replaced, as they get older, by acquisition, greed, materialism, a compulsive need to shop and to snatch and to possess. Owning things! American women in their loss of the verities—natural truths—are going stark raving mad as insistent and insatiable consumers!

To my mind, one of the biggest indictments of the American woman is the quality of daytime television, offering shows all morning and afternoon—Neilson ratings soar as libraries close—that truly only absolute cretins could bear to watch. On television's "women hours"—roughly nine to five, but especially on morning shows—snipe-faced women-hosts with grating adopted-male voices actually talk *at* each other and to their pre-

dominantly female audience as if they were talking to preschoolers, to actual morons, to mynah birds, overpronouncing words, repeating themselves, stating the obvious. What of the mad hysteria they show? There are also those women in the morning who can be seen straining at the ropes outside *The Today Show* and howling for attention! Following the facile banalities of TV soap operas! With smoking uteruses jumping up and down and bellowing at game shows, screaming "I won! I won!" What has happened to the life of modern women that such programming has for so long prevailed? I suggest that women who habitually watch these shows, who howl and weep and scream and laugh at brainless soap operas and sitcoms and game shows, have fallen completely and shamelessly into their noncreative nature without any countervailing pride. It is not only proof of wastrelism and intellectual sloth but in fact, I would argue, only another aspect or facet of serious depression. How else explain that the marketing of new pills by pharmaceutical companies in virtually all the medical trade journals are not only oriented toward unstrung women but actually advertised with images of sad, distraught, half-distracted housewives on the brink of hopelessness who, having abrogated all semblance of growth, are crying for instant relief—relief that only the latest small pills and capsules can provide? After such knowledge, what innocence?

"Women do not use their mental capacity: they deliberately let it disintegrate," writes Esther Vilar in *The Manipulated Man*, railing in a tirade against her very own gender. Mary Wollstonecraft registered the same complaint. So did Madame de Staël, Doris Lessing, and Mother Gubbins, to name but a few. It speaks to her condition in nature and the halo of iniquity she wears by being what she is in a duration of a collectivity no one seems to have to wanted to define until now. Vilar goes on to ask with fury, "Why do women not make use of their intellectual potential? For the simple reason that they do not need to. It is not essential for their survival. Theoretically it is possible for a beautiful woman to have less intelligence than a chimpanzee and still be considered an acceptable member of society. . . . Surely it would take them [men] only a couple of days, considering their own intelligence, imagination, and determination, to construct a machine, a kind of human female robot to take the place of woman. For there is nothing original in her—neither inside nor out—which could not be replaced. Why are men so afraid to face the truth?"

"*Blargghh*," squawked Warholic, suddenly nettled, fiddling in his

bowl with thumb and forefinger to remove several cloves and a cinnamon stick. He got up, yanked at the underwear stuck in his buttocks, and, grabbing a bottle, spilled a little cognac into the soup, then sat down again, proboscillating his meal like a fat peccary. "I taste chicken fat in this," he said, sucking a spoon. "*Gribbenes* 'til Wednesday night! Like my ass isn't clogged like a winter rathole?" He looked at Eyestones as he read, sighed, and said as he gestured toward the pages, "You see how long the whole goddamn thing is, right, Greengoggles, or do you don't?"

Some would argne, falsely, that women have been held down by society, until one stops to realize that down through history duress has not only rarely held down any true artist but, on the contrary, has often been the actual occasion of his best work. De Sade, Genet, and Nelson Mandela—prisoner number 466/64 in the notorious Robben Island hoosegow, just off Cape Town from 1964 to 1990—all wrote much of their work on toilet paper in darkest despair. Marco Polo wrote his classic account of travel, one of the most influential books in history, while he was clapped in a Genevan prison. During a 37-day burst of energy, using both sides of a forty-foot roll of paper, the Marquis de Sade wrote his opus on crime, *The 120 Days of Sodom.* What of poverty as a hobble? Take the Roman poets. Horace's father was a slave. Terence himself was a slave. Catullus was penniless and died at 30 after a miserable love-life with faithless Clodia. Tibullus was dirt poor. So was Sextus Propertius. At a young 29, Juvenal was banished from his country by Domitian for writing a lampoon and then his wife divorced him. Virgil, the "poet of herdsman, farms, and heroes," was born in a ditch and grew rich only by hard work. The *Aeneid,* his masterpiece, is an epic of doubt, of suffering, of trials almost too great to be endured; its author despaired of it while he was writing it, and even as he lay dying, at the age of 50, he wished to burn it. Historically, women contend that they have never been given a chance, but chances are taken, not given. It is my contention that in order to create, in fine, a women has to disobey her biology, so to speak, in order to obey "herself," refuse her biology in order to pursue "herself," disobey herself in order to find herself, as it were, subtracting something in order to add, and while examples of the admirable women who have done so are legion, it cannot be easy. To sculpt, to write, to compose, to paint for a woman is, in a manner of speaking, to betray her own "art," the art of bearing a child. The state of pregnancy is a woman's natural state, according to Dr. Freedolph Anderson of Eastern Virginia Medical

School, who went so far as to state on the *Today Show* on July 10, 2000, that a woman's "periods" are not even necessary, and he recommends that a woman, whether she is sexually active or not, continue to stay on birth-control pills for her own continuing good health. Indeed, there have been many creative women. They are brave, they are intrepid, but they are not common. A salmon desperately swimming upstream to lay her eggs is the metaphor you want. I am not declaring that women lack vision. Or depth. Or genius. Not at all. A creative woman is not an oxymoron: she is simply a tautology.

Sexual woman is, in a sense, the antithesis to creative man. As the feminine principle of nature, woman is not above or below but rather the embodiment, the living and breathing example, of what man not only out of social expediency but for self-identity both has to master and some would say—in order to succeed—try to avoid. "Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome," wrote Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, regarding the biological determinism he felt we must rise above. "What avails it that you are Christian, if you are not purer than the heathen, if you deny yourself no more, if you are not more religious?" What he means is, we are called to a higher identity than is reflected in what accidentally is given us by nature alone, and he asks that we meet, indeed exceed that challenge.

What is civilization if not a product of mankind's struggle against nature, embodied most dramatically and iconographically, to my mind, by Adam in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* having to fight wildness, cut weeds, tame foliage, and in general wrestle a living out of a hostile, intractable greenery that would otherwise yield nothing. Man pursues art and science and religion, which are the only alternatives to nature that he is able to conjure to conquer. The biological equation is simple. Men fecundate; women discriminate. Women are nature; men battle it—which creates, no doubt, in sexual and social terms, that tension of irreconcilable opposites to be found in the human condition, which is why sex stands out as one of the major ways that people manage to acquire power for themselves. Women in their temporal and seasonal and menstrual and climatological extravagance are as alterable as the fickle weather whose abrupt and various swings for thousands of years have informed their moods. They are tidal. Their moods in their mutability recapitulate their lunar changes, like their menses: flux and phases and changes. They are as yeast and grow big with the promise of fecundity. Their precepts and authority are ancient and are the rules of γέ, mother earth.

Women are fertilized by the male like the earth by rain, inseminated like

the earth by wind. Women are the anima. They bear us, house us, receive us, hold us, feed us with their milk, deliver us in pain, nurture us with an almost unawakened and primordial cognition, even selecting their mates by a biological determinism, often inexplicable to themselves, invariably by following the safest, the richest, the biggest, the longest, the tallest, the strongest, whom they seduce more often than choose. They are the hunters, overall. Anthropologist Susan Allport, studying chimpanzees, believes that it was female gatherers—not male—who were the first to use tools in digging for roots and pulverizing them. (Male hunting did not involve the same needs.) And why make this point? To stress the fact that storing food is the essential natural activity! As British scholar William Ralph Inge once proclaimed, "All of nature is a conjugation of the verb 'to eat.'" An alimentary difference between the sexes is that while males are looking for females, females down through history have spent most of their time looking for food. Finding it sociologically diagnostic, Allport writes, "Something that I was reminded of the other day by a kindergarten teacher who was concerned that the girls in her class, but none of the boys, were hoarding the snacks that they were given." Even after reaching puberty, Allport points out, females hoard food on their bodies, as it were, as fat accounts for 27 percent of woman's body weight as opposed to 15 percent for men. With women, food and eating and security is one continuum. Allport finds it significant that with women "an expensive meal is often the prelude to intimacy."

The Natural Mother and Mother Nature, then, are distinctly twinned. The categorical imperative remains that, as each embodies the other, sexual woman, in order to make, must in a sense refuse her proportions. The homology of woman artist and subversive is made as she rises above the "defect" of biological fecundity in order to fertilize the book that proceeds to become her "baby," the symphony that becomes her "sex," the sculpture she "nurses," etc. It is vitality that women stand for. "And Adam called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living" (Genesis 3:20). For art to be the alternate for a woman, the object of her choice, she must to some degree violate that overriding vitality and will in consequence invariably sound in her art—one can always hear it—some note of reparation or contrition that I believe is the central theme of her art. Is it any surprise to note upon closer inspection that when women novelists do write they write about love and marriage, not about maternity? They eschew what they know but repudiate in order to concentrate on what they need but regret. There is an eternity before them, but they are always short

of time. What a mouthful to say there is in English literature no great poetry on the subject of motherhood and never will be.

"In *The Descent of Man* Darwin had already pointed out that while men were forever driven by the urge to create, the urge to expend energy to overcome opposition, women were governed only by the passive, instinctive compulsion to re-create, to reproduce, to repeat themselves until the end of time," notes Bram Dijkstra in *Evil Sisters*. "Indeed," he writes, "it was a common mistake to think that primitive women had been physically inferior to the male. There was ample anthropological evidence to suggest that they might once even have been the stronger sex. Their misery was due to their 'inferiority in the struggle for existence on account of maternity.'"

Women, sharing a partnership with the opposite sex while systematically torquing the meaning of it—for survival, for supremacy—never prefer honey over vinegar in the final analysis of what men like to think of as romance. There is in women a savagery over kindness. Flowers, after all, are in the seed business, not the nectar business. Women bear the child. It is for what they house that they need to survive.

"Shouldn't we be getting to work?" blurted out Muskrat, stretching to yawn. "Yeah," agreed Squishy. "When is he gonna finish this shit?" "I gotta pee," said Muskrat. "Will you two shut up," roared Warholic, swinging an admonitory arm. "*Sha, shain genug*!" Lifting the carton to his mouth to drain the last of the soup, he then pitched it back over his shoulder, loudly burped, and began sucking the knob of the spoon, like a contented but big infantilized hydrocephalic baby.

Maternity itself for many women is of course even a burden. Around the beginning of the Seventies a pronounced convulsion of disgust ran through the country at what some regarded as the bullying conventions of the American family. It was not only a national polemic against having kids, a line drawn in disgust against what was seen as the tyranny of asutyomatic motherhood—"Pregnancy is one disease I don't have to get," said smug feminist Shulamith Firestone—but being waged was a full anti-parent movement. A National Organization for Non-Parents with the slogan "Who needs it?" was formed, with children seen the way they were held by the early Calvinists, as lumps of pure depravity. "I'm hostile to the act of childbirth," exclaimed composer Diamanda Galas. "I've always found the concept of childbirth to be a morbid one at best—something *nostalgic* that a West Coast 'return to nature' cult would espouse." It has been argued

by some revisionists that motherhood is neither instinctive nor automatic. Although famous for her drawings of children, Mary Cassatt had no desire to be a wife or a mother. Actress Melina Mercouri refused motherhood. So did Simone de Beauvoir who also would never get married. Mae West who always sat facing a mirror declared, "I never wanted motherhood, because you have to think about the child, and I only had time for me. Just the way I didn't want no husband because he'd of interfered with my hobby [sex, surely] and my career." Even if nature may conspire to keep women at the task of motherhood, where is the guarantee that they will oblige? If they should oblige, the "parent–offspring" conflict, according to Robert Trivers and others, would remain a constant tension, and no more so than at the stage of infancy. (May not one detect in such conflict the seeds of the rage to create?) With women, the rates of desertion, abuse, brutality, and outright murder by mothers are astonishingly high. Does it not recall Cornelia Otis Skinner's unforgettable observation, "Women's virtue is man's greatest invention"? It has been proven a constant that in primitive tribal societies, if a newborn infant (usually a girl) seems unlikely to thrive or is unwanted, the formal acceptance of that baby is often postponed. Or worse.

Murder in fact is commonplace in such instances. Cultural biases, economic pressure, and superstition all play a part here. But in modern times? It has become even worse, leading some sociologists to believe that in the stressful future "allomothers"—reliable but hired caregivers—will have to be called in to put an end to such crises. It is not only because many working women today prefer an easier life, hate responsibility, or refuse to share. What we are learning is that, along with postpartum depression, fetal demands in subtle but actual ways can actually hurt mothers physically like diabetes, pre-eclampsia, etc. May we then not ask, are the children of mothers rivals to them? Is it possible? A natural rivalry may very well be the case. If the urge to create is a challenge to women, if it is difficult for them to write a novel or sculpt or compose a symphony or write philosophy, it is frankly no easier to give birth. Opportunity—who doubts it?—is always also an obstacle. Scholar Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, drawing our attention to an even further complication, advances in her book *Mother Nature* the remarkable thesis that the inordinate plumpness of newborn infants, who are much fatter than any other infant primates, is an actual attempt on their part to convince their parents that they are worth rearing and not destroying. Even an infant's smile is, in Hrdy's opinion, part of the tiny infant's strategy to seduce its mother!

Women as nature's gender seem nevertheless always far deeper, more

profound, than the problems they face! They are naturally selected for their permanence, their imperishability, and their persistence. They are ultimately more durable than men, have more fat, possess a superior sense of smell than men, endure cold better, are more intuitive, seem better at multitasking, awaken from surgery more quickly than men, and usually live longer. In their earnestness, they outvote men and are madly environmental, have smaller brains, dream less, think less abstractly, and tend to be acquisitive like most of the lower creatures of the natural world, such as crows and cats, penguins and packrats, marmosets and magpies. (As to women and the natural world of animals, Semonides of old waxes eloquent comparing them to bees, donkeys, weasels, monkeys, and pigs.) The bones of girls harden earlier than they do in boys. The mortality rate for most diseases is higher for men than for women. Most of the X chromosomes, in fact, do not participate in the swapping of genes during the creation of egg and sperm; at best, it is merely a conduit through which move genes from the real masters of the human universe: women. A woman's natural and reproductive functions, because they have to be stronger, make women stronger than men, fiercer in attack, arguably more competitive. Richard Nixon in *Six Crises* asserts that in politics, specifically elections, "women basically find it much harder to lose than men." Having greater muscle-power is actually a source of constitutional weakness in the male sex. Men flame out faster with their stronger metabolic rate. The female in virtually all species on earth lives longer, on average, than the male because she is the biologically more valuable part of the species-capital. Women even have different tastes! Why else did Frank Sinatra claim that in all his life he had never known a woman who could select neckties he really liked? Women alone of the two can make love without desire. Is it because that in their deepest consciousness they feel estrogenically doomed? Why else do women consistently insist on redefining their social revolt as "difference feminism"? The unavoidable answer is that because emotive-relationship-oriented women—a double redundancy—in order to think, need to feel what they are close to, and it can lead to disappointment and to disaster. "In revenge, as in love, women are always more barbarous than men," wrote Friedrich Nietzsche, who spent a good deal of time trying to solve their complicated equation. Woman are deep, lunar, profound, enterable, warm, sensitive, emotional, both more familiar with pain and more provident than man. The survival instinct in women, which is extreme, is in direct opposition to their sense of continuity, which is virtually nonexistent, for to pursue the ways of survival that involve dodges is almost never

to follow the principles of vows or ideals that instills duty. They endure like the earth and in that sense prevail. Women who are built to survive not stand around, throw in the towel not temporize, initiate divorces more frequently than men, are less inclined to take their lives, and when they do commit suicide it is invariably by using pharmaceuticals and drugs and not through violence. It is a documented fact that men are twice as likely to commit suicide after a divorce and with more lethal weapons, like guns and knives and ropes. Who would deny that women's biomorphic form follows function? Notice that almost every single issue of every women's magazine carries as if by fiat an astrological chart! And why? Women are about cycles, methods, styles, forms, patterns, genes. Planetary implications speak to their sex. Pioneer feminist Ida Craddock, who was cruelly hounded and harassed by the blue-nosed censor Anthony Comstock into suicide, was the first person in this country to write publicly and honestly about a woman's sexual contractions and orgasms. Prior to this, ludicrously, men alone, ludicrously, were supposed to be sexual, women not at all. Ms. Craddock's most famous remark, significantly, was also her most persistent bit of advice when she spoke to women, which she always—constantly—repeated: "Feel your nature."

"Finished yet?" groaned Warholic, humming and nervously jerking his knee up and down. A parfleche of fat shone visibly through his misbuttoned shirt, and his tie was now askew, hanging like something throttled.

Sexual woman is the antithesis of creative man. They stand in relation to one another virtually as nemeses. William Graham Sumner in *Folkways: A Study* (1907) wrote, "The sexes differ so much in structure and function, and consequently in traits of feeling and character, that their interests are antagonistic." It is in the fundamental gender dichotomy that in showing us what woman embodies also tells us what man in turn has to make, to create, to forge, to build. Doesn't that explain why Hedy Lamarr wore velvet on safari? Why the women on the *Mayflower* on November 24, 1620, could only go ashore thirteen days after the men? Why Joseph Proudhon, who saw that women's understanding of the human heart is restricted to the personal and the relative, declared, "Woman is the desolation of the righteous"? There can be no rights against nature, however. Law does not restrict liberty; it creates the only liberty there is, the chromosomal inevitabilities that shape the fate against which no tricky or reversive or balanc-

ing philosophical blather can make any logical headway. Art in a very real sense for biological woman is implicit autogynecide, in the very same way that, given the fastness of their intransigence, those women, in the words of Ellsworth Huntington in *The Character of Races*, "who stand strongly for women's rights are rarely the mothers of the next generation." Strong, devoted mothers are not only the ones most likely to pass on their innate qualities to the next generation but the ones least likely to write novels, sculpt figures, compose symphonies, desigu buildings, and paint canvases. Huntington goes so far as to suggest that feminism is a form of suicide. He writes, "Let the present rapid process of selecting the strong-minded women for destruction and the gentler, less aggressive ones for motherhood continue a few generations, and the banner of feminism will have to be hung on the wall—an interesting trophy. No type can persist long if it is rigorously picked out for destruction whenever it appears."

Nature, to some thinkers, has turned women into wholesale pragmatists and dream-killers. "A girl is a creature who seems to practice youth but really serves to liquidate it," writes Witold Gombrowicz, who, in recognizing the discretions of biology, nevertheless blames women for merely being breeders and nothing more. Mindlessly following nature, a woman, to his mind, utterly wastes the beauty given her by flagrantly blossoming only to fertilize to reproduce. "Look!" he cries, "that girl is young and beautiful, only with the aim of becoming a mother! Shouldn't beauty or youth be something gratuitous?" Why in women does this charm serve only to breed? To be allied to pregnancy, offspring, diapers? "Romanticism," he says, "ends with a contract at the altar at the side of that fat lawyer . . . its highest manifestation [to] create a child and that marks the end of the poem." Was this why the Kinsey Report on sexuality found in the 1950s that fully 23 percent of women at age twenty-five were anorgasmic, a full fourth of them, sabotaging their own nature as a protest against it? It is to Gombrowicz's great disgust that girls by some ongoing hideous and subversive design become dogmatic mothers and peevish aunts and censorious teachers—intractable authorities—who in fairy tales "beat adventure out of the dreams of boys." Such cold didacticism reaches even into feminism. "Today a woman is more of a woman than she should be; she is loaded with femininity which is stronger than she is." Beauty that should be discreet and appear reluctantly, ideally, for Gombrowicz, in the margin of another aspiration, is now to his dismay, even contempt, used only in the service of sex. Women no longer see their beauty or youth as an end in itself but walk an endless pilgrimage giving themselves away to any nit-

wit or numbat or knucklehead. And why? Nature is time, women fear age, and in Gombrowicz's mind in order to fulfill their nature they are driven by cowardice and lack of vision to—terrible oxymoron—*use* their beauty. "Woman! You embody anti-poetry!" he concludes in a vicious attack. He accuses her not only of refusing her gifts but of betraying her dreams, her hopes, her very self all the time "with her desire to please and so is not a queen, but a slave, and instead of appearing like a goddess, worthy of desire, she appears as terrible clumsiness trying to conquer an inaccessible beauty." May we not then point to Gombrowicz to explain why creative women are such rarities?

"If two lists were made of the most eminent men and women in poetry, painting, sculpture, music—comprising composition and performance—history, science, and philosophy, with half a dozen names under each subject," wrote Charles Darwin in his *The Descent of Man*, "the two lists would not bear comparison." It is not only the most articulated example of imbalance in Eastern culture and Western Christendom, but the most glaringly embarrassing fact of inequality imaginable. Speaking of the Renaissance, Jacob Burkhardt notes, "The greatest possible praise which could be given to the Italian women-celebrities of the time was to say that they were like men in brains and disposition. The female principle is not conscious of a necessity for emancipation. The vast majority of women have never paid special attention to art or science, and regard such occupations merely as higher branches of manual labor." Shall we dismiss Burkhardt as a misogynist, or more realistically put him in with E. M. Cioran who simply stated that "the more one is in nature the less one is an artist"?

Who is surprised to see that creative women are almost *never* mothers. It is a fact that seems not only to corroborate Gombrowicz's complaints but to confirm his findings. It seems that in order to succeed in life, outside the borders of their nature, women have to become muscular. (Do men for balance concomitantly become more feminine? "Hairdressers, harpists, and cooks. Most are women but the best are men," observes Ned Rorem.) Many women in their own minds, ideally, would rather replace than pursue men. Adoption by single women—"designer babies"—is the present trend. Women do not want husbands. Whom they marry is what they resent. Jane Austen, the novelist of marriage, at one point in her fiction has left us a cynical and, in her mind no doubt, realistic view of that institution: "Mrs. Hall of Sherburne was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband." (Was Miss Austen's mysterious literary silence from

the years 1800 to 1809—never explained—possibly connected to such a marriage, such a child, indeed such an attitude?) The unspoken idea is that nowadays in order to succeed in their stead women seem to think they have to mimic men, if not replace them. Husky voices, raucous with the growling stresses of a U.S. Marine drill instructor, are a commonplace in the media. Listen sometime, for example, to women broadcasting on the radio and televisions networks today; in their sour-sonorous, square-shouldered delivery they all try to sound exactly like men. Women broadcasters, however, despite adopting pantsuits and confidence-inducing spectacles, in the end always cede to nature and flirt even with the very news they're reading. Facial games. Eyebrow mechanics. Jewelry. Stylish clothes. Nothing can alter it. It would be like trying to stop a Maori from liking bushpig. The former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, "the first pin-money prime minister," according journalist Joan Smith, essentially disgnised herself as a man in spite of that fulsome handbag that perpetually swung from her left arm. For all that obtrusive gender-bending masculine ruthlessness she put on as a mask for public consumption, she was in fact entirely supported by her husband Denis's inherited family paint-and-chemicals firm. Why is it that all female leaders—politicians, news anchors, physicians, etc.—fail to embody a gylanic behavior that is commonly expected in the second sex as, yes, intelligent, of course, but as gentle, nurturing, patient, peaceful, democratic, egalitarian, nondominating? To prove they are not soft or feminine? That they are fiery bulls? Tyros? Ass-kicking commandos? Decision dragons? Regents of cold calculating control? Is it by simple hap or mere coincidence that creative women as epitomized by those icy editors of New York City's greatest fashion magazines all have names like Carmel Snow and Anna Wintour and Bettina Fruzen?

"Not even now?" asked Warholic, exasperatedly taking up several rolls and popping them into his mouth munching to one side like a water buffalo. "You can't beat fun for a good time. I got an ache in my shoulder. And it's not like I don't have heartburn down here like you wouldn't believe! Matza knaydlech, schmaltz herring, lokshen kugel, and ziess un zoyere gehakte flaysh, and when I look up it's you with all this endless *shmootz*. Gedempte!"

What endless testimonials to appease women, however, with a view to cozening them, have been marshaled to reinforce their worth for themselves. Every magazine advertisement teaches women about their greater

worth compared to male piggards and arrogant schnecks and lazy, disloyal, and sadistic husbands like the red-legged scissor-man who cut off Conrad's thumbs in *Struwwelpeter*. Every television commercial panders to women to the point where it is so transparent it is embarrassing. The archetypal one shows a wife at dinner, as she cutely but surreptitiously winks at the viewer, serving a plate of food to her dopey, balding, always bespectacled husband who with pop-eyes most gratefully exclaims, "Gosh, honey, how d'ya get such great flavor in this steak? It's ynmmy!" The poor dumb bastard as he is portrayed on TV doesn't have a clue that his industrious little wife has done little more than opened a can or cracked a box or thrown something in a microwave oven. All American television comedy is based on the premise in imbalanced marriages between unmanly men and their far wiser long-suffering spouses, between dimwitted dads and sensible moms who also double as incomparable housewives. All television sitcoms by way of reverse condescension are shamelessly feminist, simply because Madison Avenue fixes on who the purser of the family is, from *Bewitched* to *The Beverly Hillbillies* to *I Love Lucy* to *Leave It to Beaver* to *Petticoat Junction* to *The Donna Reed Show* to *All in the Family* to *Cheers* to *Murphy Brown* to *The Jeffersons* to *Good Times* to *Sex in the City* to *Everybody Loves Raymond* to *King of the Hill*. Alice Kramden on *The Honeymooners* was always—*always*—right, her fat, idiotic husband always—*always*—wrong! So was Wilma Flintstone. And Edith Bunker. And Weezie. And Florida. And Marge and Lisa Simpson. The central theme of *The Simpsons* is that the superstellarly stupid Simpson males, dopey, self-defeating, and beef-witted losers, are spectacular failures while the women in that family, moral beacons, can do virtually anything they choose and remain the didactic fulcra of almost every resolution at the end of each episode. It was the same with old-time radio's *The Great Gildersleeve*, *Fibber McGee & Molly*, and *Our Miss Brooks*, as it was with the comics such as "Bringing Up Father," "Blondie," "Andy Capp," "Li'l Abner." How amazingly at loggerheads that idea is to Louise Bogan's poem "Women," which opens,

> Women have no wilderness in them,
> They are provident instead,
> Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts
> To eat dusty bread.

Bogan surmises how coopted women can be by renunciative if quotid-

ian motherhood, adding,

> They wait, when they should turn to journeys.
> They stiffen when they should bend.
> They use against themselves that benevolence
> To which no man is friend.
>
> They cannot think of so many crops to a field
> Or of clean wood cleft by an axe.
> Their love is an eager meaninglessness,
> Too tense, or too lax.

The revolting reverse consideration is of course that women are easily flattered and open to the toadying contrivances of soulless commercials. It is axiomatic in Hollywood that movie favorites are usually created by women. Women who are incorrigible starfuckers by dint of their unspecified discontent and the submissive note natural to them adore slick celebrities and pursue them with the dizzy mania of monarch butterflies after milkweed. Nor do women's migration routes vary from the wayward fritillary, for the second sex is in the end not romantic but predictable as pushed putty. A religion dies when it tolerates truths that exclude it. She remains outside the divine adventure even if upon first look she seems its embodiment. Reverence of cinema beef is conformity itself.

What is especially grotesque is that feminists who mistakenly think genius or even talent is about mere opportunity and career options and favoritism in crazed attempts to close the gender gap have been neglecting schoolboys for whole generations. Facts bear this out. For more than thirty years now, attention in schools has been devoted almost exclusively to girls who, comparatively speaking, are being celebrated way out of proportion. Give them the soccer balls, the footballs, the scholarships, the awards. Boys in America are thought of as being only in the way. Smutballs. Excess baggage. They are neglected and treated like sullen curs in consequence, aggressive mistakes, dirty little culprits who would do better to disappear.

"A woman's demand for emancipation and her qualification for it are in direct proportion to the amount of maleness in her," wrote Otto Weininger in *Sex and Character*. "Emancipation, as I mean to discuss it, is not the wish for an outward equality with man, but what is of real importance in the woman question, the deep-seated craving to acquire man's character, to attain his mental and moral freedom, to reach his real interests and his

creative power." Please don't try to tell me that those two cross-grained and ass-kicking buttinskis driving Saint Paul crazy in Philippians 4:2—"I plead with Euodias and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord"—were not tomcats with zipper flies! Nowadays American women dress like men, in pants; talk like them, as broadcasters; and walk abroad not only with a mile-long stride ready for night crimes and loaded for bear but with a bitch's bark and a baboon's canines taking bites out of every tit and tip and tax-option, recalling in their pursuit for anyone who has read it the eccentric Olive Schreiner's pointed remark in *Women and Labour*, "There is no fruit in the garden of knowledge it is not our determination to eat." Otto Weininger, who once said, "It is only the male element in emancipated women that craves for emancipation," also believed that such women indeed revealed some of the anatomical characters of the male, external bodily resemblances! Recent female world leaders—Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Hillary Clinton, et al—have always extravagantly appeared to be among the most asexual creatures imaginable, something hard and durable and homely like automobile mud-flaps.

Was Elvis correct in the film *Fun in Acapulco* when he said, "No man wants to get married"? Aren't most creative women unmarried? It is a fugal melody that has run through thousands of cultures for hundreds of centuries. That is a calumny against womankind, you may respond. But, if so, name any sovereign artist happy with her lot as a woman. And have not most women artists down through the years adopted a male persona, those tough, over-aggressive, excessively mannish cheroot-smoking extremos like Gertrude Stein, Amy Lowell, Djuna Barnes, Radclyffe Hall, Harriet Martineau, Frances Trollope, Madame de Staël, May Sarton, Sarah Bernhardt, Natalie Barney, Elinor Wylie, Carson McCullers, Jeanette Winterson, even their gentler if no less neurotic sisters like Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and of course the redoubtable Aurore Dupin, aka George Sand, who smoked cigarillos, cross-dressed, rode astride, slept with her hob-nailed boots on, and obviously realizing the antagonism of nature to art, became a writer only after deserting her husband and children and moving to Paris. "I wish I could be tactful enough to say that I regret not having married," wrote Edna Ferber in her autobiography, *A Peculiar Treasure.* The unmarried and childless novelist added, "I do not think love is sacred . . . writing is a combination of ditch-digging, mountain-climbing, treadmill, and childbirth." It was no different with the painter Rosa Bonheur who with her female lover dressed like a lumberjack in Maine, lived in her studio with hamsters or some such thing and out-

raged all of Paris. How about sculptor Louise Nevelson who, completely reinventing herself after changing her name from Leah Berliawsky—she was born in Russia in 1899—divorced her husband and ruthlessly abandoned her children to lead a hand-to-mouth existence in Europe for thirty-five years in order to pursue what she insisted on calling art, if indeed that is the correct word for all those chaotic and craptastic manufactured piles of goalie sticks that she painted all black or all white, as if that mattered. "All I ask is the privilege for my masculine part, the poet in me," wrote novelist Aphra Behn in her preface to *The Lucky Chance* (1686). It is astonishing.

Women, who haven't the slightest mood-congruity, can often uncomplicatedly if falsifiably take on the male persona and without breaking stride seek to flourish by that usurpation in their relationships with men, for a woman more than anything needs a weak, diffident, and dependent man in order to lean on him, not the opposite as is commonly thought, for more than anything else she has to know he needs her, even if she vehemently denies it or fakes plaintive astonishment to the contrary. Any man in her life becoming too dominant or strong, in her mind, assassinates her sovereiguty by the very *act*! Are you surprised to learn that the reason girl toddlers two and three years old compulsively undress dolls is almost never curiosity but basically because they like to *manipulate* things?

Why is it a staple that almost all creative women are gorgons of antifecundity? Virginia Woolf—conflicted by her lesbianism—confessed to her own burden of self-repression using the word *virile* as an insult. Woolf is infamously on record as stating quite unequivocally that being in love is the state of boredom. The mother of confusion, Gertrude Stein, a writer chronically deaf to elegant writing and a creature who was convinced that only a few rare women are born exceptions to their sex, never tried to disguise her belief that being a genius required her to become a man. ("I am very fond of yes sir," she wrote.) Her robotic, contortionate, semiautistic prose style, quite obviously classifying her frenzies, was in fact part of her sexual equipment. It is of moment to note that on each and every morbid, dull, repetitive, unaccommodating, and hamfat-full page of hers in which nothing is defensible, she specifically avoided any and all references to women and emotions. Ayn Rand, that "objectivist" proponent of selfishness, a rude, pushy, unkind, demanding, ill-tempered dominatrix who, clearly subverting her own emotions, took a weak and spineless "accoutrement" as a husband, a man chosen specifically for his looks, his image, not surprisingly had no children, and her work stops just short of trying to prove that children do not even exist. No career off-ramps for Rand

or her ilk, no rustling up an omelet for hubby, no see-through teddies for mister, no struggle with the domestic side of things, no leaving a traditionally structured job to pip some spoon-headed child in the harness of male-world conditioning—fuck you and your horse collars, jack!—and then be left out of a job, good advancement, and the high-performing power-track in the process. No part-time work options, no mommy-track for her or her characters, no lame "second shift" thinking, thank you, no opting out for the domestic over the career highway. Rather lofty defeats than aspirations to pointless halos flung out like fun-fair rings by domineering males!

"I put on pants fifty years ago and declared a sort of middle road," pronounced Katharine Hepburn, the formidable, no-nonsense, trouser-wearing film actress who not only shined her face with rubbing alcohol, never used jewelry or gems or perfume, refused to employ makeup, except on her lips, or to wear nylon stockings but who was also resolutely childless and sexually determinate. William Mann, in his biography *Kate*, observed of her, "She was, in her soul, neither woman nor man, though it was men—straight men—with whom she identified. . . . But it was only with women that she could set Jimmy free and be herself"—Jimmy being the short-haired boy she named herself around the time she was ten years old!

One may also recall here, parenthetically, such childless world-movers as George Eliot, Nadia Boulanger, Julia Gordon Law—founder of the Girl Scouts of America—Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton—does Maria Montessori, the educator and physician, qualify, who as an unwed mother tried to bear her child in secret and left the newborn son in the country to be brought up privately where she visited him only secretly?—Florence Nightingale, Catherine Breshovsky, "Grandmother of the Revolution," and, say, Amelia Earhart, who in 1932, having been a bride for only a year, became the first woman to fly the Atlantic Ocean alone (in what compared to Lindbergh's 1927 flight was a shorter distance in a much better plane, a high-wing red Vega) but wished then and later not to have any children. Peter Rabbit author Beatrix Potter, a somewhat sour woman who neither bore nor liked children ("I have never cared either for popularity or for the modern child") and after marrying at 47 immediately swapped writing for farming. A contemporary hack, Barbara Taylor Bradford, whose husband/manager pays for full-page ads in the *New York Times* to promote his wife's novels, has no children but lots of bichon frise puppies. Her "Six D's of Success" for writers, an alliterative mantra, are "Desire, Determination, Discipline, Dedication, Drive, and Distractions to be avoided." Nothing about diapers.

What is the displacement? Flight. Fugues. Always flight, literally or figuratively. That is why it is not men but invariably women, escapist wackos without love or children or sanity or God, who go in for all of that psychotic interspecies transferal and choose to be alone in the jungles with gibbons and gorillas all their lives.

Women painters Marlow Moss, Cecilia Beaux, Florine Stettheimer, Marguerite Gerard, and Sarah Miriam Peale, were all neurotic and unmarried. Georgia O'Keeffe and Marie Laurencin were divorced. Constance Mayer and Alice Neel attempted suicide. British painter Edith Hayllar abandoned painting when she married the Rev. Bruce MacKay because she viewed a career in art as antithetical to a woman's "natural" destiny as a wife and mother and it had to be given up. How curious it is that so many women painters were either married or attached to male artists, almost as if the sanction to create was somehow aligned to one's spouse. Frida Kahlo was married to Diego Rivera, Sophie Tauber to sculptor Jean Arp, Dorothea Tanning to Max Ernst, Loren MacIver to poet Lloyd Frankenburg, Vanessa Stephen to the writer Clive Bell. Art for woman is a reach out of nature. The word *geisha* is revealing. *Gei* means woman, *sha* art. They are not natural, not *of* nature. That is what makes them so unique.

In the idiotic Ayn Rand's pugnacious and polemical novel *Atlas Shrugged*, a book "nearly perfect in its immorality," according to Gore Vidal, the verb *to give* is forbidden. Her work is about self-centeredness, plain and simple, a song to the snatch, the shove, and the grab. In her earlier novel *The Fountainhead*, her character Dominique Francon would much prefer passively to sit by and watch every last one of architect Howard Roark's buildings explode rather than see their balconies hung with diapers. The "heroic WASP ideal" in Rand's skewed view excluded virtually everything female, in fact—softness, breasts, fertility, fat, lactation, devotion, self-sacrifice, motherhood-sweat, pillowy feminine features, selflessness—but in point of fact only mocked her own incapacities, for she herself as she walked around, in spite of her dollar-sign pins and swirling capes, was the perfect *anti*-anima figure: a short, absurd, dark, homely, hairy, bow-legged, spiteful Jewish gnome, born Alisa Rosenbaum in 1905, the daughter of a pharmacist named Sinovi, who was as angry as a crab! What in the end these people adopted as artists was what they rejected as women.

I am entirely convinced that pop singer Madonna always wore bullet-cone bras, corsets, and various and sundry female frillies and underpinnings to exaggerate the femininity that her essential toughness betrayed, the bald, unstoppable, and merciless corporate hustler in her that is so

mannish and far more important to her than her music. The abrupt act of becoming a mother coincided almost perfectly with the death of her career. Art is one birth, children another. The female artist invariably kills the feminine mother. The majority of female musicians that punk singer Tom Verlaine knew appeared to share a desire to find the man with whom they could make music and make love, which are not the same twin urges in male musicians. This may explain why women are so painfully self-conscious in their attempt to pursue art. Carl Linnaeus, who always confused morality with science, nevertheless pointed out that many plants had several wives to one husband! But why must we go that far?

"Females cannot vary," writes Lester F. Ward in *Pure Sociology*. "They represent the center of gravity of the biological system. They are the 'stubborn power of permanence' of which Goethe speaks." The female, representing heredity, while the male provides variation—this, to me, is the essentializing difference between the sexes—not only typifies the race but, metaphor aside, she *is* the race. W. K. Brooks explains it this way: "The ovum is the material medium through which the law of heredity manifests itself, while the male element is the vehicle by which new variations are added." André Gide, who believed that only things that have ceased to have practical use can serve any aesthetic purpose, declared quite unambiguously that sculpture and painting and art developed on precisely those parts of Greek temples and of cathedrals that have ceased to serve any solid or practical purpose, and it is the so-called "superior" species—the male, a creature of show, song, art, sport, and intelligence—whom, as the variable, we must credit for that wild, energizing if excessive creativity by and through which he seeks to selve.

The more one is in nature, the less one is an artist. E. M. Cioran has told us, "Ideal masculinity—obstacle to the perception of nuance—involves an insensitivity to the aspect of the everyday supernatural, from which art draws its substance." Another way of putting it is that woman is the sex of physiological foresight, the male the sex of extravagant but unproductive expenditure. The female is the guardian of unvarying hereditary values. Woman is permanent. As the ongoing balancing force of Nature, she constantly requires—seeks—regulation. Man, however, is the maker. He makes in order to be.

Women's incentives to make or to do virtually co-exist by dint of the rewards they give themselves, never mind the attention. Women's art shows and women's literary readings and women's film festivals and women's political caucuses and women's poetry slams and so forth are always held

as if zebras or spacemen or certain visiting bulb-headed lunar creatures had just miraculously done something to applaud and it has suddenly become news! Is the concept, never mind even the fact, of a man's film festival even conceivable? Come we to another but related phenomenon. As a sex, women think like schooling fish, perversely *savoring* sameness. There is an interlocking of things neither equal nor symmetrical that is perverted. Part of women's unoriginality is their hideously competitive repetition of each other, the conventional mirroring of one another not unlike Italo Calvino's peculiar city of Valdrada with its cohabiting reflection where nothing exists or happens in the one that does not appear in the other. reflective entities in which the mirror increases a thing's value sometimes and at times denies it, where although the images live for each other there is no love between them.

Poet Alice Ostriker with farcical chauvinism even appropriates a female universe, claiming—listen closely to this twaddle—that "the being we call God the Father swallowed God the Mother in prehistory," continuing to reassure us who doubted it that part of her task as a poet "is to help midwife that divine female who needs to be reborn into the world through our collective imagination. . . . The brain like a cervix."

What about women's contributions to mathematics? Nonexistent. Or their efforts in the study and pursuit of philosophy? Nugatory. Worthless. Absolutely nowhere. All right, we have Diotoma, the "wise woman" friend of Socrates who appears in the *Symposium*, but Plato makes mention of her with the same selective admiring surprise and astonishment that two thousand years later Dr. Johnson had for women preachers: "The miracle is not so much that that they do it well as that they can do it at all." What is the greatest work ever produced by a woman? Madame de Staël's writings on Germany? She was intimate with August Wilhelm Schlegel who was queer and had been tutor to her kids. What about Enhedvanna, the Sumerian writer who lived ca. 2000 B.C. and wrote verses to the goddess Inanna? Or Hrosvitha, the tenth-century poetical nun from Gandersheim who once deprecatingly referred to the "imbecility" of her own sex? The hypercatalectic excesses of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*? Emily Dickinson's poetry? Aphra Behn's thoughts? Shall we consider Hildegarde von Bingen's parochial polyphonies? The paintings of Cornelia Cnoop? Anna Klumpke? Elektrine Stuntz? Lala of Cyzicus? Uota, abbess of Regensburg? Margoreta Rottmayr? Vittoria Po? Berlinette Yweins? Orsola Caccia? The Dairy Fairy? Mary Lou Williams's jazz? Mrs. Fields' cookies? Sara Lee's frozen muffins? Mama Celeste's frozen pizza? Mother Sill's pills? Mrs. Smith's pies? Mary

Kitchen's hash? Aunt Jemima's pancakes? Little Debbie's nut bars? Mrs. Paul's breaded fish sticks? Grandma's molasses? Priscilla Picard's cheek puffs? Miss Dana Thompson's anal pessaries? Mrs. Butterworth's syrup?

Women notably have invented the signal flare, the spacesuit, the bullet-proof vest, and the windshield wiper—all, notice, devices of the protective sort, betraying the gender's instinct for survival or what could be called the "Mother Courage" syndrome. But even to cite such comparatively simple contrivances is to say too much and prove too little. We merely stress the paucity by listing the best and point to the worst by citing the least. It is not so much that women have not the capacity to invent as that, by the way of a strange triangulating link between women and man and desire, they are by nature resigned to have it done for them, which of course has its counterpart in that characteristic reshuffling maneuver of the heart they show that puts their interests at something of a Platonic remove from passion, for as S. T. Coleridge observes, "The man's desire is for the woman, but the woman's desire is rarely other than for the desire of the man."

What prominent figure—and was it a man?—recently and loudly proclaimed, "I believe women are naturally dependent on men. One admires and expects things from men that one does not expect from women, and such has been the history of the world. The beauty of painting, of literature, of music, of love . . . this is what men have given the world, not women." It was in fact Diana Vreeland, editor of *Vogue* and easily one of the most independent women of the century. I think the word *naturally* is the operative word she is stressing.

There has never been a woman Grand Master chess player, nor has a woman for 157 years ever qualified to enter the U.S. Championship, for chess is a combination of sport, fine art, and psychological warfare, matters in none of which women have ever excelled. Women comprise only 10 percent of the world's competitive chess players. (Cultural historian Marilyn Yalom pathetically asserts as if in compensation, "Women can at least take pride in the superiority of the chess queen.") There is not a single woman in the Jockeys' Hall of Fame. Nor a great woman cartoonist. Not a single woman down through history has ever had a decision-making function in a papal administration. In Jewish law, women are disqualified as witnesses in a religious court, which places them in the same category as deaf-mutes, the insane, all minors, and pigeon racers. Saint Paul did not want women to teach (I Timothy 2:12). As a sex, women never once came into Confucius's thinking or writing. In his sayings, Jesus Christ, who never quite thought of or regarded marriage as an ideal form of a loving commu-

nity, never once refers to a mother's love, although he does quite pointedly speak of a father's love, frequently, and with passion. The Prodigal Son is welcomed home by his father and no one else. Not a single New Testament book is named for, after, or in honor of a woman, nor was a Pauline letter ever specifically written to one.

Women, to avoid the risk of schism, were declared definitively unordainable for the Roman Catholic priesthood, according to Vatican *Magisterium*, specifically by *Inter Insigniores* issued by Pope Paul VI in 1976 and later by *Sacerdotalis Ordinatio,* the authoritative "apostolic letter" signed by John Paul II on his hospital bed on May 22, 1994.

There have been no female anchorites, or maybe one or two. Helen of Babylon. Women fear solitude. "A child is not enough," wrote Dorothy Day in *The Long Loneliness*. "A husband and children, no matter how busy one may be kept by them, are not enough. Young and old, even in the busiest years of our lives, we women especially are victims of the long loneliness. Men may go away and become Desert Fathers, but there were no desert mothers. Even the anchoresses led rather sociable lives, with bookbinding and spiritual counseling, even if they did have to stay in one place."

Bookbinding? *Bookbinding?*

No woman has ever written a major biography in English. Unlike Roman history, Greek history records not a single national heroine. No woman has ever been memorially laid in state in the United States Capitol Rotunda. No woman has ever written an epic poem or discovered a country or a continent or was the first to reach one of the distant poles. No woman ever walked in space or on the moon. No woman ever became a Native American chief or sachem or medicine man. (But in most tribes on the continent any *boy* could be.) Only braves were allowed to paint figures of people and animals on their battle shields--women could merely draw designs on them. No woman has ever written a great opera or a truly significant play or translated Homer or won the Indianapolis 500, the Masters, or the Tour de France. Or fought a naval battle. Or broken a world running record. Or scaled Mount Everest until as late as 1976. No woman had ever stood atop *any* of the world's fourteen 8000-meter mountains until the great Polish climber Wanda Rutkiewicz reached Mount Everest in 1976. And of course Annapurna was reached by a woman only in 1977. Should we compare or include with Da Vinci, Charlemagne and Newton, Shakespeare and Milton, Edison and Wittgenstein any common nullity who emerges with the merest miracle of an idea or chance invention or slim temptation of singularity? There are so few famous women that in the National Women's Hall

of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York—they insist on having one—there are presently only 128 members. There are no overwhelmingly great women painters or sculptors. No woman fought at Troy or died at Waterloo or was shot at Lexington or fell in the Devil's Den at Gettysburg or ate gas at the Somme or was killed at the Bulge. Women throughout history never appear as seafarers or as explorers or as engaged in maritime trade or as active in the whaling industry. It is a different species, woman. They provoke their own impulses and unidealistically leave their girlhood behind them without so much as a single glance black, whereas men fondly, even if fatuously, keep looking back at the vanishing point and wondering whither the snows of yesteryear. There is a sanctity in what we would scrutinize. The perspective is all. It is about hope, not hap, dreams, not deficiencies, vision, not victimization. Where is the female Shane loping into Cheyenne with her brave magnificent guns to save us?

A bias against women that can only have created a climate of exhaustion and discouragement for them for centuries forces us in wanting to correct the injustices to analyze as well both the tyranny and the truth.

Is it not continued proof of the vile calumny that holds women to be nothing but uncreative lactating drones that, say, in Spain the dish paella was originally to be cooked only by men (and that, just as weirdly, only for the midday meal)? That, according to Leviticus 15:26, even the bed a menstruating woman lies on is unclean? That in modern Korea a woman cannot smoke on a public street without reproach? When one considers that homeliness in a woman can prevent her from getting a job in that country, should it not be asked if it is any different in the United States for a plain woman to find work in front of a camera in the television industry? Actress Norma Shearer had it written in all of her film contracts that only a man could star with her on any picture and that no other woman's name could be put up on the marquee with hers. Didn't Thoreau insist on pointing out that life is the father and that death is the mother? Wasn't that what that sexless horse-faced fashionista Diana Vreeland was getting at, regarding the inexorable power of male creativity, when she declared. "I stand with the French line—women and children last"? ("We're a cold lot," says Maggie, played by Kay Thompson, with insane police-like aggression and rattling hormones in the film *Funny Face* [1957] in which as a domineering fashion scold she virtually castrates photographer Dick Avery who is modeled on Richard Avedon who pathetically acted as the photographic consultant on the set!) Why else could it be that in Chinese ideographs, three women pictured together denote "intrigue," two women together "to

wrangle"? Women are yin. Cold is yin. Darkness is yin. Sadness is yin. Depression is yin.

"Welcome, man of God," Saint Simon Stylites would shout from his pillar—a Syrian, he spent thirty-six years there—but only to men. For women he showed no welcome; he would not allow them to see him, in fact. A female cat that wandered into his presence, according to legend, was struck dead. According to Agnes DeMille, the boyish figure for ages has been the ideal, probably the most scandalous if not decadent fashion-fact in the history of dress. No, the cultural stress has always been aimed at the male equation as the kinetic sex, for change, for growth, for development, for reason, for art.

Which of us in these vulgar, simpleminded, and aimlessly corrupt decades of gender confusion can be shocked at the statistically solid facts that women commit the majority of child homicides in the United States, as well as a greater share of physical child abuse, an equal rate of sibling violence and assaults on the elderly, about a quarter of sexual child abuse, an overwhelming share of the killings of newborns, and a fair preponderance of spousal assaults? Why is this the case? Could it simply be the rage of feeling robbed of any self-accomplishment? Suicide, in a sense, for feeling themselves invalidated and held to be only mindless ovens used to bake bread? Does this explain their climbing tendency? Their compulsion to batten onto powerful men? Their love of fascists? Their worship of heroes? Their greed to grovel? Their pathetic yearning for wealth as a means of validation? Their insatiable acquisitiveness? Their self-loathing born of unfairly having to compete with men? ("Women are the anti-Christ," pronounced Ms. Barbie Hand on *The Howard Stern Show*. "Complicated. Manipulative. I'm one of them. I know.") What then explains the murder and the mayhem? The fact that, as Eric Hoffer, the San Francisco longshoreman-philosopher asserts, all the way down through history they have always sided with anything that smacks of the upper or ruling class and almost always vote against the working man?

Women are the creatures of nature. It is a fact, from the tyrannies of automatic motherhood to the training of tots, even to the slaughtering of them in mad, hand-wringing lunacy, and nothing they do is an anomaly. There is feminist hatred out there. "Motherhood is in trouble, and it ought to be," said Betty Rollin of NBC News. What is the famous pronouncement of the National Organization for Non-Parents regarding children? "None is fun." In the film *Bus Stop*, Beau declares, "Women are different," to which Cherie replies, "They're natural." But in the words of Horace,

"*Naturam expelles furca, tamen usque recurret*" (Drive out what is natural and it returns at a gallop!). Isn't it true? Creativity is not a window on sanity? Most anti-depressants in the United States are written for women, who, statistics state, are twice as likely as men to suffer from depression, particularly between the ages of twenty-five and fifty. The aggregate terror! Premenstrual syndrome, panic attacks, nicotine addiction, bulimia, bad marriages, infidelity, television assault, etc.—face it, even skyrocketing anti-depressants are not anodyne enough. Why, the very act of *quitting* antidepressants causes depression! Are not the dim proxies of extensive shopping, crazed bouts of cooking, feverish afternoons of gardening, the compulsion for collecting things like thimbles and dolls, courses in ceramics—I would also throw in gossiping, and even faux-creative acts like "sophisticating" the furniture—aren't they all attempts to a degree on the part of women at being creative? In Baron Munchausen's Syndrome, people invent or manufacture symptoms of disease in order to be nurtured and so gain sympathy, functioning in their paradoxical madness like the tain of a mirror, the dark backing which allows the front to reflect. I would certainly call Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy, another bogus attempt at creating, those documented cases of fanatically nepirastic but demented ersatz mothers who get a perverted satisfaction from making others ill, usually children, and then *creatively* rescuing them! There was a recent case of a woman named Marie Noe—suitably named by fate—who smothered eight of her ten children and got only twenty years probation so that a gathering of scientists could put her under the microscope and study her like some exotic fruit-fly or ancient coelacanth.

Arguably, for a woman to be barren is even worse. A childless woman is, in a sense, an uncreative woman and an uncreative woman by dint of her barrenness, her emptiness, can become a living time-bomb! Extreme feminists such as Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly and Yvonne A. Flowers and Ti-Grace Atkinson and Andrea Dworkin and Pussy Pie Pankratz—dyed-in-the-wool man-haters—all actually contrive to defend anger, rage, brutality, and vindictiveness as necessary adjuncts to justice as well as a template for women to go from nothingness to achieving some kind of recognition. "I scream, therefore I am." Given their biological predisposition, however, what else can the lost creatures do but become lunatics, moonatics, road-killers, baby-throttlers, mad, unrepaired, and hopelessly irreparable lampoon-eyed vitifragists running helter-skelter across cities in titless disarray creating their very Dionysian vocabularies and breaking every glass window in sight in order to call attention to all their irratio-

nal gripes and grievances? Could this explain why Paul Lynde playing Mr. McAfee in *Bye Bye Birdie* cries out, "Next time I have a daughter, I hope it's a boy"? Anatomy *is* destiny. Our physiology is our fate. Debate it all day. Husband arguments to the contrary. Run it through a ringer like premises through a syllogism. Nothing will ever change along these lines.

Nothing rarely does. And yet is it not a matter of moment, while remaining an immutable fact, that in the annals of slaughter serial killers, without the slightest respect for human life, almost never kill their mothers? It is one of the strangest facts in the annals of homicide. The reason is as mythically old as the race. For Woman is Eve, regina of the clouds, anima of the seductive south, sun-daughter, crown of the moon, fluid river mother, fat girl terrestrial, paradigm of nature, tower of ivory, she who makes the air the mirror of herself, the universal muse, the eternal feminine that perpetually leads us on. Nevertheless, for all her mystery she is beside, above, and below the creative act, and, in that, in the words of Wallace Stevens, she stands tall in self, not symbol.

When Eyestones finished re-reading his essay and looked up, Warholic slammed the desk with catamorphic force and stood up, awkwardly unsticking the fat pants from his huge rump and loudly grumping, "Enough already!" He farted. "I gotta tell ya, you're a *kochleff*. A crazy meddling fucking *pilpulist* with both guns drawn and smoking, OK? You go bat-shit about a subject, handing me an international jet-ride when all I asked for was a small bus tour. Plus, you're harsh on chicks. I'm up to here with it already! That's why they want my ass! You want to know why? That's why."

"Harsh?" asked Eyestones, ignoring the irony of hearing it from a true misogynist.

"Hectoring."

"I took my cue for heat from a higher source," Eyestones replied. "There are only two passages in the whole Bible where 'God is love' is declared—see I John 4:16—but many where God is defined as a 'consuming fire.'"

"You're a *schwätzer*!"

"You are not reading it right."

"You make women sound frivolous," said Warholic, reaching down to goose Muskrat.

"That's not and never was my point."

But Warholic for Eyestones always had a certain left-handed affec-

tion.

"Oh, who gives a care. My concern is, did you snout out anything libelous in there—any goddamn references or legal flashpoints— on Broomstick Woman, even so much as a utilitarian trickle, that could hang me? I do not intend to get hauled into court."

"I made a handful of notes. Here, take them."

"The Thin Witch. I saw her face looming up in every sentence. She looks blister-packed."

"I never mentioned her."

With what contrasts was Laura's character revealed in what he wrote, he wondered, that someone, anyone, could see her unless through pure hatred, and, given that fact, what presiding imp ruled over the atrocious logic of the world? Do we basically see what we fear? In loathing her thinness, had Warholic then confessed to what he tended not to see of his own *un*identifiable awfulness, Eyestones wondered, hiding like crime, covertness, and cunning in the unmercy of his own lying fat? "Bone is personality, fat is pancake," he recalled the great ballet master George Balanchine once said in defense of his pupils. "You can dress a skeleton, make it sexy, anything. You can say, Ah, that person is so-and-so or such-and-such, but you never know what a fat man is."

"You mention everybody, E^2."

"Hardly. Anyway," Eyestones said, shrugging, "I try to operate outside the normal. I wasn't aiming for exalted bravure, merely the truth. According to Brendan Behan, 'The first duty of a writer is to let his country down.'"

"Women are sensitive, you forget." Warholic grabbed at Squishy. "All that shit about women not being leaders?" When he clacked his teeth, it sounded like the clapping of a stork's beak. "Ever hear of Madame Curie?"

"And?"

"You tell me."

Eyestones asked, "Whom did I leave out? I can think of others history overlooked."

"Like?"

XIII
A Short History of Creatrixes

"Wanda Woodpecker of Puddlebury?

"Mother Gin-Sling and her Shanghai Gesture?

"Saint Barbara, Patron of Thunderstorms?

"Ulli, the Goddess of Snowshoes?

"Mrs. Persis Albee, the first Avon Lady?

"Sarah Winchester, rifle-manufacturer and Oliver Winchester's daughter-in-law, who invented rubber mats for the kitchen sink?

"What about Margaret Knight who in 1871 created the paper bag?

"Catty Weeks, inventor of the first cardboard golf club?

"Renilda of Elka's miniature paintings?

"Maria O'Brien Donovan who invented diaper covers?

"Helen H. Malsed who invented the Slinky?

"Kubaba who ruled the city of Kish circa 2450?

"Hatshepsut, the female pharaoh?

"Dido, queen of Carthage?

"Laura Battiferri and her verses?

"Ozma, the princess of Oz?

"Madame Crematon, the inventor of the safety pin?

"Doris Bunting, the monologuist?

"Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen?

"The love songs of Marie de Ventadour, the female troubador or

trobairitz?

"Tabitha Babbitt of Vermont who gave the world the first buzz-saw?

"Alice Terplitz, inventor of goat cheese?

"The flatulent sculptures of Ms. Vinnie Ream?

"Edissa, daughter of Mitten I, king of Tyre, who founded Carthage?

"Abbess Bugga of Minster and her reveries?

"Kate Shelley with her railroad lanthorn?

"Sacajawea the pointress?

"Marjabelle Y. Stewart, the Queen of Couth?"

"Julie Bulette of Virginia City?

"General Jinjur and her army of rebellious girls?

"Walking Blanket Woman, aka Mary Crawler, the girl warrior who stabbed Custer?

"The fifteenth-century Italian scholar Elena Cornaro Piscopia, the first woman to receive her PhD.?

"Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, head of the Nazi Labor Corps?

"Shingebiss, the cheery brown duck?

"Francesca Caccini and her *musica vita*?

"Barbara Strozzi, the seventeenth-century Venetian who learned everything from Cavalli and whose lyrical compositions were written by Julio, her father?

"Betsey Metcalf who in Rhode Island in 1798 produced the first straw hats?

"Gertrude A. Mullen who before she died in 1954 invented the first child car-seat?

"Bette Nesmith Graham from Dallas, who was the inventor of correcting fluid?

"Wilma Deering, the flapper with the ray gun?

"Lois Weber who ground out silent films?

"Countess Habeba, the Expert Palm-Reader?

"Solange de Maillardoz, director of Vatican radio?

"Aphra Behn and her manuscripts of bumph?

"Folly and her Erasmian disquisitions?

"Ms. Biljana Plavsic, ex-president of Bosnia and war criminal?

"Poet Katherine Phillips, the matchless Orinda?

"Henrietta Treetops and her sweathatchet?

"Suor Plautilla the paintrix?

"Louise McNutt and Her Cycle Whirls?

"The web-footed Queen of Sheba, *la reine pédauque*?

"Kora, the virgin of Corinth?

"The Empress Wu, who butchered her own children?

"Sofonisba Anguissola and her sixteenth-century dawbs?

"Machig Labdron, the eleventh-century *yogin*?

"Mary Lease, the pythoness of Kansas?

"Modesty Blaise, the impossible virgin?

"Marina Tsvetaeva and her red walls?

"Composing madames Lucia Dlugoszewski? Louise Talma? Barbara Kolb?

"Psyche, the White Rock Cola Girl?

"Olga Hess, the Headless Carny Girl?

"Sylvia Hardy of Wilton, Maine, at 7'10½" the tallest woman in the world?

"The late Bessie Hyde, *disparu*, the first person to paddle through the Grand Canyon?

"Gloria Swanson with her plastic-button patent?

"May Anderson of Birmingham, Alabama, who invented the windshield wiper?

"Saint Ia, the Virgin Who Missed the Boat?

"Mrs. Eliza A. Swain of Wyoming, the first woman in the United States to vote?

"Medea, the slaughtering Greek?

"Grace Hopper who coined the term 'bug' to describe a computer glitch?

"Lavinia Bump (Mercy Bumpus Stratton) who was thirty-one inches tall and married Tom Thumb?

"Cybele, the Spookarama Cyclops?

"Maithuna Viparita and her wiles?

"Doña Gracia Nasi, the big-nosed militant *marrano* and Portuguese nag?

"Melitta Benz, the German hausfrau who in 1908 created the first conical coffee drip-filter?

"Tomoe Gozen, the samurai warrior?"

"Annie Edson Taylor, the first woman to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel on October 24, 1901?

"Sister Tabitha, the Shaker who invented the circular saw?

"Krimhold, the bloody caterer?

"Marozia, mistress of Pope Sergius III in the tenth century?

"Liane de Pougy, the grand horizontal?

"Cyrena the Stewhouse who knew one thousand ways of performing intercourse?

"Margaret Colvin who invented the rotary washer?

"Gertrude the Pocket Books kangaroo?

"Ursula Mother Shipton, the fifteenth-century seer?

"Eilley Orrum, the 'Washoe Seeress'?

"Lady Evelyn Carnarvon, the only woman Egyptologist who entered King Tut's tomb in November 1922?

"May Florence Potts and her efficient double-pointed flat-iron?

"Mumbet the slave who in 1781 sued for freedom?

"Fanny Fern of the *New York Ledger* and her feminist news rant?

"Skarda, the goddess of skiing?"

"Madame Hon-Cho-Lo, seventeenth-century pirate and terror of the Yangtze?

"Dinah Nuthead, first woman printer in America?

"Elaine, the lily maid of Astolet?

"Agnes Woodward and Her School of Artistic Whistling?

"Mother Bunch, the sixteenth-century tavern-keeper?

"Mary Walker, the only woman to win the U.S. Medal of Honor as surgeon in the 52nd Ohio Regiment?

"Edwina Dumm, the first woman editorial cartoonist?

"Vanozza Catenei, paramour of Pope Alexander VI?

"Jeanette Rankin, the only member of the Congress to vote against the United States's entry into World War I and World War II?

"Sarah Winnemucca, Paiute lecturer and squaw?

"Matilde ('The Cat') Carré, French spy and double agent?

"Joice Heth, George Washington's aged black nurse?

"Lydia E. Pinkham and her black cohosh?

"Deborah, vengeful judge of the Old Testament?

"Mrs. Prout who made the first American cigars ('long nines') in Windsor, Connecticut?

"Anne Marie Gailers, the Fat Owl of the Remove?

"Patience Lovell Wright (1725-1786), the first professional woman wax sculptor?

"Lady Ada Lovelace and her computerial fascinations?

"Serpentine, the Coney Island Snake Charmer?

"Constance M. K. Applebee, who in 1901 introduced field hockey

to the United States?

"Magdalena Hofdemel, the pianistress who slept with Mozart?

"Golda Mabovich, Israeli fascist who hated Arabs and had a doorknob for a nose?

"Jingo, Regent Empress of Japan?

"Ann Shaw Carter, the first woman to get a helicopter rating?

"Ruth Cleveland, for whom a candy bar was named?

"Kay Swift, who wrote the music to *Fine and Dandy*?

"Ataska, the Gorilla Girl?

"Wilkie Bard, the Widow Twanky?

"Belle Baker who in 1932 was the first person to host a radio variety program from a moving train?

"Saint Macina the Younger, mother of monasticism?

"Dressmaker Ida Rosenthal and her Maidenform Bras?

"Marion Talley, the first woman to sing in a movie (1926)?

"Christine Quintasket and her novel *Cogewea, the Half-Blood*?

"Tammy Faye Bakker of PTL, the raccoon?

"The women of northern Ch'i province in China who invented matches in 577 A.D.?

"Sarah Byrd Askew who in 1920 designed the first bookmobile?

"Caresse Crosby, born Mary Phelps Jacob, the first person to patent a brassiere in 1914?

"Comrades Rosa Zemlyachka, Elena Stasova, and Maria Spiridonova who led the Socialist Revolutionary Party in Russia in 1917?

"Myra Belle Shirley, aka Belle Starr, the bandit queen?

"Olympe de Gouges, the knitress, executed by the Jacobins for her militant advocacy of women's suffrage?

"Mistresses Joan Salvato Wulff, Mary Orvis Marbury, and Frankie Albright, nonpareil flyfisherpersons and expert bait-casters?

"The sextress Peculia? Sue Storm? Red Sonja? Wonder Woman? Bionica, Bride of the Metropolis?

"Serena and her bowties? Biting Marion? Dame Durden? Maud Lindsay and her 'Mother Stories'?

"Margaret Knight, popularly called 'The Woman Edison,' who invented the dress-shield, a clasp for holding robes, and who patented a window-frame and sash?

"Marozia who elected her son Pope John XI?

"Sister Partlet with her hooded head?

"The holy maid of Astolot who fed upon shadows?

"Ms. Daeida Hartell Wilcox, the dodo who invented the name 'Hollywood'?

"Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the Mexican girl prodigy of the seventeenth century?

"Lillian Gilbreth who invented the foot-pedal trash can?

"Liadan of Corkuguiney, the medieval ollmah?

"Ruth Hanly Booe, inventor of the bourbon ball?

"Evangelists Emma Curtis Hopkins and her Ministry of the High Watch? Annie Rix Militz and her Boston Home of Truth? Myrtle Fillmore and her Unity School of Christianity?

"Nettie Colburn Maynard, the medium whose entranced if addled advice to Abraham Lincoln during a séance—he gave her a job in the Department of the Interior—led to the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation?

"Mrs. Repulisti? Claribella Oughterly? The Witbowl Girls? Ilse Koch? Mrs. Nitwitterly? Alicia Jay Bushcar the political hysteric? Eleanor Dork? Oxygène, the Bajan tart? Chicken Little? Henny Penny? Cocky Locky? Ducky Daddles? Goosey Poosey? Turkey Lurkey? Gander Pander? Sapphira? Cozbi? Gomer, daughter of Diblaim? Haggith? Herodias? Vashti? All those false and lazy Scriptural prophetesses, the women who sewed pillows to armholes?"

XIV
Mr. Sardonicus's Invitation

Warholic ignored Eyestones and his pedantic list of sarcasms regarding female creativity. It was typical of his antic eccentricity to go on at such lengths, the editor knew. His own sole anxiety was about being sued, a matter that Mutrux the lawyer had been warning him about after the shoaling reactions that followed publication of the essay. While Warholic insisted that parts of the piece sounded extreme, even if inventive—and possibly true—he also suspected that Eyestones had written it in the wake of having just returned from a disastrous trip across the United States the previous summer with Laura, not only a walking nightmare as he knew only too well but a vanity-starved would-be artiste to boot. It was Warholic's guileful assumption that every thought in the essay, every idea, virtually every sentence, filtered through Eyestones's consciousness, had its roots in that experience, which for all anyone knew was the very reason Eyestones had gone traveling in the first place, using Laura as a lab rat.

The deed was done. How the essay could serve his purposes was presently his sole consideration. Eyestones, who knew why he had been summoned, suggested that they simply wait and let everything blow over. "Wait?" asked Warholic. "I have depositions to sign here. You're like my ex-wife who is living for the day I check into the Graybar Hotel and hear the snap of a rubber glove behind me! I'm talkin' jail." Eyestones knew it was merely noise. Warholic, as everyone knew, was one

of those cunning entrepreneurs and publicity hustlers who not only found every knock a boost but who lived to make it pay—and well. Advertising for the journal had not fallen off a jot, of course. He knew as well that Warholic, even if he basically liked him, was jealous of his knowledge. Warholic had wanted to be a writer himself. He actually thought he had talent along those lines. "Being able to eat your body-weight at one sitting is not talent," as The Krauthammer always said behind his back. "Neither is getting an IRS 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status," her friend Ann Marie Tubb always added, "for religiously screwing people!"

"So"—Warholic with a tight fist stifled a rising eructation—"what do you say about all this big-tent prose of yours?" He looked up. "No answer?" Smugly sucking his teeth, he flamboyantly threw the ink-pen sideways like Charles Foster Kane after hastily signing several depositions, then straightening his fat pants and letting out his belt a few notches as he went waddling across the room where he sat on a stool like a walrus balancing a ball. Eyestones dropped the magazine on the desk and said, "Prospero is Hamlet who gets his revenge through art. I once knew a brilliant person who wrote an unforgettable book, several actually, and his envious brother who also wrote—shallow, mediocre things that he cranked out with a minimum amount of grace or care but that were more acceptable to the johnny nitwits out there who buy books as soporifics and not as aids to dream or to imagine or to expand their mind—could never quite forgive him. Without that one masterpiece, you see, it does not matter how much a writer does or what he says. What I'm talking about is originality, which is rooted in daring and defiance and rage and recklessness and revolution, and not about sucking up to a world of brainless, mouth-breathing inchlings and half-assed dopes and stupid and illiterate mudnuns who read their books aloud and usually line by line with the aid of a running finger."

"It cost me money," said Warholic.

"You'd prefer a situation where all I can condemn is cancer and praise only sunshine?"

"Well, I gotta tell you, Eyestones, I am having lawyers look into it, and when the shit hits the fan, it's your trouble, so it's your expense." With a sly look around, he paused for a moment, then taking Eugene by the tie, whispered so no one else could hear, "Unless you want to publish it as a book, and we go fifty-fifty. I have already been contacted by one of those antiquarian book-sellers, you know, rare-book guys,

this one lives over in Jamaica Plain, who wants to do a private printing of your essay, a limited edition."

Eyestones knew about this cagey, money-grubbing species and how cunningly they beat the bushes for rare, valuable books, often hoping to get them free and signed or both as they cravenly hunkered before you, giving nothing of course in return but a weak, damp handshake and sweaty palms, loudly proclaiming to value what they quickly squirrel into their bags like swivets of dead pelts until they turn around and sell them for three or four or more times their value. They did not work, only snatched, and were worse than common trulls who at least gave their bodies in exchange for cash. Rare book dealers. First edition mavens. They were true jackals, hyenas, sniffing around behind apex predators to snatch a stray bone or collop of meat or any offal, the equivalent of dump-pickers. Eyestones had himself in fact once been fleeced when one of these obsequious, unclassifiable articles of common commerce, with his wife and dopey baby in a buggy filled with books, insinuated his way into a bookstore where Eyestones was signing several of his books of poetry and proceeded, with cringing praise in whipped-butter tones, to pile up stacks of books for him not to inscribe, but simply to sign, the better to sell. He gave him nothing in return.

Warholic then with his trademark howl hustled everyone from the office with a sweeping gesture—with a bow he ostentatiously kissed Muskrat's be-ringed hand—which found them all on the street.

"*Pssst!*" It was tiny Abe, with raked eyes and arms bent, almost tortue, twisting out of his parents' grip only to run back and beckon Eyestones into a nearby doorway. "I sometimes f-feel I don't really even live in the g-general universe at all," he spat, his eyes pin-wheeling, "b-but in a s-small enclosed special b-bubble fashioned only for me and ruled by a couple of implacable d-demons who have incarnated themselves in my m-mother and f-father!" He screamed, "*I was m-miscreated!*" Eugene gulped. Then Abe fled, shouting in his wake, "Write about it! Write about it! Write about it!"

Exiting the building last, Warholic suggested steaks all around, Dutch treat—that is, after Mutrux, the San Diegos, and Mr. Fattomale disappeared. Eugene quickly begged off. "What, are you a vegetarian? Laura the Blowpipe back at Castle Dismal in the City of Sam and Fran Cisco used to hand me that shit, too, when, according to Mutrux, she was sneaking off behind my back with some pop-inflected thrill-kill rock 'n' roll cultist wearing paperclips for earrings and socks in his

codpiece, and maybe you know the same thing, since from all I hear you yourself are one of the biggest advocates of that *farblunget* bitch." Eyestones said nothing in reply. Warholic's big uneven nostrils flared, and he was sweating through his malodorous shirt. He reluctantly admired Eyestones, in spite of himself. Was it because he had pity when he himself showed only contempt, even a venomous hatred, for her? "Will you straighten me out about something," asked Warholic, grabbing his crotch and hooting with crude laughter, "if we're not supposed to eat animals, how come they're made of meat?" But there is in that particular kind of moron who cannot *hear* you while he is talking the devil who needs to prevail.

"Any year now," said Muskrat, standing there.

"Yeah, we're late," added Squishy, checking her watch. "Let's get going."

"Walk us over to the Purple Cucumber," Warholic said to Eugene, who was thinking disconsolately of Abe San Diego. "Why?" asked Eyestones. "Why?" echoed Warholic. A flabby scowl sat squarely on his face. "Why do Armenians look awful in hats? Why are baby pigeons never seen? Why is there no Latin word for *tea*? Why are goyim stupid? Why is *irregardless* not a word? Why do all eels come from the Sargasso Sea? Why are there canals under the city of Utrecht? Why is baseball in America called a pastime? Why did William Randolph Hearst only read his own newspapers from west of the Mississippi? Why is there always a slight medical 'breakthrough' *just before* Jerry Lewis's Muscular Dystrophy Telethon? Why is a one-inch nail a twopenny? Why does British royalty never have anything typed? Why can't bacteria live in honey?" Warholic was out-of-shape and walked top-heavily, like a tuna standing, waggling forward, on its tail. He pulled his long nose and sidled up to Eyestones with a leer. "We'll watch a few strippers and then grab a big meal in Chinatown at Wun Dum Fuk's." Lust exaggerated his mouth-sounds, thick, teeth-clicking, sibilants, that always gave a fried-egg sound to his voice. He pulled Eyestones's sleeve so needfully as they walked along following Muskrat and Squishy that he obliged the editor, both because it was on his way to the T and he pitied the contentious ex-husband as much as he did his cantankerous ex-wife.

"A couple of weeks ago I heard the rumor that women have feelings too, and I want to talk about it," said Warholic, sneering and toying with several indignant last strands of hair at the side of his head, "me and the ferrets." He nudged a quiet Eyestones and gave out with a

laugh bronchial and mule-like as it slowly gathered momentum. "I insist on the analogy between curiosity and lust. Remember the old movie *Gilda* with Rita Hayworth and Glenn Ford? I quote. 'Statistics show that there are more women in the world than anything else—except insects!' I love it! Don't you, Eyestones? Beasts! Walking morts! Vampiras! Take a look at them! Cadaver-cell lip-injections, labia-snipping, make-up tattooing, vaginal-tightening, sweat-gland-blocking, footsole-softening, cuticle-repairing, eyebrow-lifting, buttock-hoisting, collagen-shooting! Straight out of some polemicizing sermon on the foulness of Hell by some snipe-nosed Christian demonhunter like Savonarola unworthy of the mind's perfume! Look at them! And when they look at men, they have the nerve to ask us if *we* are real!" He fatuously bowed. "It is kisstomory to cuss the bride!" he declaimed, as the two women toddled before as they all wended their way down once fashionable Washington Street with its broken sidewalks, padlocked theaters, cut-rate businesses, and filthy doorways and entered the even seedier section of the city called the Combat Zone with its X-rated movies, 25-cent peepshow booths, notorious bars, and low, artless strip joints like the Pussy Cat, the Silver Slipper, the Intermission, and the Two O'Clock Lounge. Lasciviously, Warholic ran up and bit Squishy on the neck as she cackled with laughter, and then he waddled rocking back to Eyestones. "Look, *smarmoret*! Goose-bumps!" he said, holding up his arm. "Still, I respect women! I do believe we should treat them with honor, and, as you know, there's only one thing better than honor—inner," said Warholic, grinning and plapping his fat lips. "Look! Watch! I treat 'em all like royalty. Kiss their hands, like in Europe! Hoo boy!" He grabbed Muskrat's hand and slobbered all over it. His face was too huge to conceal the flash of cunning that shot across it as cretinously he grinned and then reached to grope Squishy.

"According to Elinor Glyn, who taught Valentino the right way, one should more properly kiss the palm of the hand, not the back," said Eugene Eyestones.

"Who are these shzlubs that I should care," asked Warholic, turning to spit. "Valentino? Some patent-leather-haired Islamo-fascist guinea? *A deigeh hob ich!*" Good god, thought Eyestones, taken aback as he listened to the editor, has my essay allowed for *this* kind of rant? What have I done? He stopped. "So are you coming in to see these gorgeous strippers do a turn or what, E²? I haven't got all day. What's the matter, you got a depression? What's your problem? You look empty like a god-

damn bialy with a depression hole! I am beginning to think, honest to Christ, you really are a hermit. Did you drive in or take the T?"

"The T," he replied. "The Rattler."

"You who once drove helicopters through VC ground-to-air missiles now take the T?"

Sighing, Eyestones paused on the cusp of a memory. "I flew one of the UH-1E transports—'slicks,'" he said. "What we called 'frogs,' which had machine guns, but also the bigger 'hogs,' gunships with M79 grenade-launchers. Nothing bigger. No A6As or F-105s. Frankly, I believe I felt safer back there than passing these Combat Zone doorways."

"I worry about you," said Warholic. He walked feet foremost and, with a center of gravity somewhere near his ankles, looked as though if someone pushed him, he would bob right up again. "A highbrow I would define as a man who has found something more interesting than a woman." Lurid posters out front showing photographs of the daily menu of strippers highlighted the few last "Naked Ladies" theaters in the vicinity. The office all spoke of Warholic's escapades there, leaping about with $20 bills in his mouth and reaching to grope the strippers. "Forget Paris! I want to see Revitalique wearing her mask and Crayola De Blu do her whore's dance and see Flava du Jour and Cach Nang, the Vietnam Vixen. Or Cheesequake—what big bazookas! Anybody," said Warholic, "except smoky, overweight Miss Sin Dee 'The Sinner' Kissimee, the black giantess who pulls a Zippo out of her magic slit, lights a cigarette, and then rolls around the floor like linoleum." He whooped. "Eveeeerybody piles on!"

Muskrat turned to ask, "What about Mickey Mouth, the ditzo, the one who snuffs candles with—"

"Bracelets is my favorite," said Warholic, leering. He wiped his slick head and its few strands. "She's demented, I swear. Not the sharpest tool in the shed. But sex sick! I'd give a year's pay to spend a single night with her in the Velour Motel!" A long rubbery upper lip fought with underbite to give him one of the ugliest mouths on the planet. He whispered. "Ever see any of that stuff in 'Nam? *Tokei asobi*, where a woman blows a man while crawling clockwise around his body? Or *daisharin asobi*, a soaped lady lies on top of a man and rotates her body all over him? No, I guess it's strictly Nipponese."

"When are you going to give up this stripper addiction?" asked Eyestones.

Warholic snapped, "When lesbians own poodles!"

"I've got to get going," said Eyestones, uneasily.

Surrounded by the editor and the two women, he thought of La Grange's Theorem: "Every integer could be expressed as the sum of four squares." *Including me*!

"Look at them buns," said Warholic, his tongue darting in and out of his mouth as he followed Muskrat and Squishy down the sidewalk. He had an ugly bed of a tongue like one of those Chinese spoons made of porcelain. "I've never seen a better valentine, except on Creedmore, that bimbo over in the diner by you. Trouble is, she charges, I hear." He took Eyestones's elbow, whispered with a nod and a nudge, "Her shirt barely covers her wagons," and called out, "Hey, Squishy, look, I can make a shadow puppet of Florida without using my hands!" The editor's skin had the tweed of a bull shark and a urine scent grew stronger as he moved closer to Eyestones. "Look at those two. Happy as dead pigs in sunshine. No brains! Hot water bottles with tits! 'Sex workers' was what Chicken Legs used to call them, the *putz*," he said, lifting his filtrum with the uxoravalent malice of a fat probing finger to cruelly mimic the high, red, gummy grin of his ex-wife. "Laura had aspirations that way herself—and with her greed would have been the perfect whore, if she weren't so homely—except that she was too lazy, too fearful, and too ditzoidal! What a *fortz*! But then why do anything herself when she could marry me, right? She took up the piano, never practiced, bought books, never finished reading them, enrolled in courses, never studied, went to art school, never painted—she has done nothing with her life. *Gornisht! Kreplach! Bobkes!* What a *tsutsheppenish*! Dumber than fucking cafeteria help, Double Eyes, let me tell you, no brains, and even worse, a coward!" He spit through his teeth. "I used to blame it all on her own mother. Why? Because *she* did. You ever met the fat bitch? I've heard she has an ass big enough to have its own congressman! Well, I'm suing her no-ass daughter and hope to send her to prison to get diddled for a decade by gangs of merciless diesels with lead pipes, OK? Gamahuched! Shagged! Banged by filthy, lewd, deranged lust-mongering transsexuals! How does that sound?"

Eyestones shook his head and declared, "A high libido usually contraindicates transsexuality in all but the rarest cases."

Warholic suddenly raced up and goosed Muskrat, who swung around with laughing fangs, then skipping over he squeezed Squishy's breasts, which made her yowl with delight. Warholic guffawed. He laughed

harder, as his nose blew a bubble, and he kept laughing through his mucus. "Look at them! Yum-balls! Women should be dressed in white like all other domestic appliances." He laughed like a jungle mandrill, yipping, bellowing, then turned his head sideways soberly to ask Eugene, "Who was it said an unfeelable form is a failure?"

XV

A Woman with the Hair of a Pythoness

A solitary person is a perpetual question. Coming home from the office the following week, with the days rainy and now growing colder, Eugene was unable to get anything done, for Laura Warholic kept coming by with all sorts of problems. She had lost her job, her father ignored her, she disliked her roommates, she had no friends, no money, no future. It went on forever. Her company became increasingly like a dim major chord swelling with an insistent repetition, a faint obbligato that crescendoed until it drowned out whatever melody had been there in the first place, except one never had. Theirs was one of those relationships that had developed where, by unspoken words and blithe assumptions, he was seen over time, by assisting her and helping her, as being with her, as tied to her, as—and this was essentially in her own mind—as *seeing* her. It had long been over. Her behavior had become more irrational, unreal, even her letters rehearsing her own bitter fate—he had pleaded with her, repeatedly, staying away to let her solve things on her own—had become only more scrambled. It was as though wherever she turned nothing went right. She wept over herself, fraying napkins and trembling. Eugene, who badly wished her out of the darkness, felt at first that her tears, which were part of her contrition, were somehow necessary for and aligned to her will to change, somewhat like a tablecloth at sea dampened to keep the dinner plates in place, but sameness forever prevailed like an unfolding

fatality. What did she want of him, he wondered, knowing she had no idea what she wanted of herself? And why did he bother? Why, he wondered, couldn't he be like his neighbor Mr. Harootootoonian in his red suit selling the encyclopedias he did not read? It was always on such occasions, with Laura making dramatic resolves that she swore up and down she would keep, that in the gloomy half-light of her misery they always embraced, tentatively, when to him her body never felt so thin, her bones never so sharp.

Laura almost congenitally degraded every option to the rank of pretext. She was going to pay all her overdue library fines, keeping mum about the books stolen she wanted to keep. She was going to learn to bake bread, read more, get rust remover for her bicycle, buy a ceramic bowl, research art jobs at the Museum of Fine Arts. She wanted to study computer manuals. She made a vow to check all the job boards at local environmental groups. Eugene repeatedly found lists of hers—orderly resolves—as bookmarks, between his car seats, left on shelves. Nothing of course ever panned out. She had contempt for scruple and, as time passed, a swelling insensitivity to the logical ways that even the most basic progression is made. Who was it that said, "The obsession with remedies marks the end of a civilization"? What worried him was her hysteria. At about age fourteen, according to her, Laura had been struck temporarily blind by what she vaguely described as an "emotional-type" episode, one she never deigned to explain. For months she had depended on her ears to guide her. It was all of it horrible and bleak.

She was "self-mated," as it were, a player whose incompetence or inexpertise virtually compelled her opponent to checkmate her. "How do I begin paying off my debts?" Laura would wail, over and over again. Eyestones took her shoulders and said, "It's like eating an elephant. One bite at a time."

It was complicated, thought Eyestones, trying both to help and to advise her in any way. He had neither the right to intrude nor the obligation. Theirs was not a relationship, for one thing, not a union, not a bond, not an alliance, not even a confederacy—it was a *collage*, a loose form of connection, a sexless, aimless, and temporary detente involving no cohabitation or commitment. The middle is a muddle. Overhelping Laura was as bad as ignoring or neglecting her, a case of *les extrêmes se touchent*. Although his efforts for her were neither simultaneous nor sequential, to watch with her was wistfully a way of waiting.

Where most he expected to have an effect, he most often failed—for men are homesick in their homes, and strangers under the sun—and so, in relation to her, he pursued the unforeseeable. The singular and most profound way of knowing is to go where one has never been before. The secret to seeking and finding knowledge is "elsewhere." If Laura was different, complex, inscrutable, he concluded, let it be. One could never solve by simplification. She was not one thing. There *is* no one thing. No *unum est necessarium.* As Theodor Adorno told us, "The whole is false."

Laura was immature, and yet, while determined that she should matter in a lifetime that was passing her by, had done exactly nothing to help herself—reading, writing, painting, studying, even working—but instead had wasted her time almost exclusively in the pursuit of sex, dating, and looking for the one man whom she clearly expected to save her from the very fate she herself ignored. At thirty-six years old? It was an age that even with certain dilapidated expectations one, for suppleness, was never expected to give up fate as futile.

It was self-delusion. The way Eyestones got it, she was, if shy and a romantic of lucid disappointment, nevertheless hormonally escalated with a sort of "strangers-on-a-train" syndrome and went to bed with men to stave off loneliness. It constituted a way of belonging, he felt. They once went into a small record shop in downtown Newburyport, for example, and although Laura had only been living in town for less than a week, a long-haired guy at the counter with a face like a malamute, only one of an entire low droogie entourage that Laura later mentioned hung out there, knowingly spoke to her when she walked in. "Hey, Laura," he said, "you want that Love Shovel CD? It came in." Eugene could see, as she brightened, that insider status meant everything to her. In another instance, a soldier on a bus, she told Eugene, called her after she had given him her telephone number. "Because there's something about a soldier," sang Eugene,

> "Something about a soldier,
> Something about his bearing,
> Something in what he's wearing,
> Something about his buttons
> all a shine, shine, shine.
> Oh, a military chest
> Seems to suit the ladies best.

There's something about a soldier
That is fine, fine fine."

"What can I say? He looked like Evan Dando of the Lemonheads. *Très* slanky," explained Laura who, in spite of it all, insisted all along she wanted only to be with Eyestones. How could anyone ever trust such a person, he wondered, even if he loved her? After she had moved down from Newburyport to Cambridge other names were mentioned. He once saw her talking to a black man, a quop-nosed goon in a porkpie hat, unshaven, with a batik handkerchief tied round his head. Was this Jamm the Wesort, the person to whom she had several times alluded with no further clarification, except to say she had met him in some night-school art class in which she said she had enrolled? Other names and shadowy figures mentioned but who she claimed were only acquaintances were Dave, Lamont, Dan. She referred to men as "snacks," their penises as "beer cans," their company "jive time." And yet for all her efforts men always ignored her after being with her once or twice and never called her back. Over time, he had learned, even worse, that she had had at least one abortion, maybe more, and diseases like *retroflexio uteri* and *myoma* and ovarian tumors. She seemed to be offering almost to wrest it from craven cowardice a kind of information-warfare that, even if defiant, carried in its frankness what absolved her—what she hoped would absolve her—from deceit. Still, it was all rather like the low expectation of no longer existing in, by, with, or for someone, anyone, whom she might love. Listening to her, Eyestones wondered what ever happened to the power of profundity of love, the long-lost world, say, of Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* when the beautiful Syrian, Erminia, who desperately in love with Tancred and finding him fallen in combat, cuts off her hair to staunch his bleeding? It was a world from which Laura, suffering so, self-excluded herself. Oh but she knew she was right. She knew she was right. Thank you, trollop.

"You make yourself inessential," said Eugene.

"I want to," she insipidly replied.

Eugene responded with, "This is hot ice, said Shakespeare, and wondrous strange snow."

A Dionysian urge alone compelled her in life. She seemed to go into transports of lust every few months or so that involved an interlude of throwing herself at a complete stranger. Whenever she met a new guy—not necessarily met, merely came across, say, pass in some shop

or happen to notice at the beach—she would blush and grin and turn noticeably foolish. "Nice package," she would announce. "So buff. Major snack." She was a virebramentiac, Eyestones thought, as, unsolicited, she provoked only another idea for his column. Eugene had never seen anything like it and began to wonder if it was possible that Ali ibn-abi-Talib, the husband of Mohammed's daughter Fatima, and founder of the Shiite sect of Islam, was correct when he wrote, "Almighty God created sexual desire in ten parts: then he gave nine parts to woman and one to man." Loud music. Random sex. Movies. She liked them all. She watched movies in theaters, TV movies, movies-of-the-week, made-for-TV movies, and, Eugene's favorite—he loved the phrase—original motion pictures made for television! There was occasionally a weak flourish in the direction of art. Her grandmother, a lonely and uneducated old bat who lived in Syracuse, New York, was only one of the sources of income for mendicant Laura; she sent her a hundred dollars every few weeks and even forwarded her the newspaper tabloids, which Laura devoured. "Aliens Land in Topeka," "Man Bites Dog's Nose Off, "I Were a Teenage Waswolf," etc. Warholic was right. Laura was a classified-ads pariah and not only familiar with but word-perfect in all the terminology of the classifieds as if she had done nothing for a lifetime but pore over the esoteric rubrics of "Personal Ads." She knew about all sorts of sexual things like lesbian abuse, tribadism, "daisy chains," spanking, "tops" and "bottoms," felching, "lamplighting," "safe" words employed during S&M practices, and exactly what transpired when TVs, TSs, CDs—violent femmes or nervous emmes—and other exotic or creatively initialized gender-benders got together under the same roof. Sex seemed to be the sole subject that fascinated her and that in any discussion she would come alive about.

One night at Scaltrissimo's Hot Dogs, a well-known diner over in Medford where after they first met he took her for a special taste-treat ("boilers," boiled in water; "rippers," sizzled until opened; "carbonators," scorched on a grill) she sat in a booth, randomly flapped open one of the many alternative newspapers in the Boston area, and, scouring a classified page, asked, "What do you think a guy means, like, when he writes '40ish, average-looking, huggable, educated, and open-minded'?" Eyestones replied, "Fifty-two and looking for a twenty-five-year-old. Two thumbs and a reasonably erect posture. And let's see now. 'Huggable'? Mmm. I'd say overweight, with a rubber tire. Will treat you like an idiot. And 'open-minded' is easy. He wants to sleep

with your sister but if she's not interested he'll share you with his best friend, for money." Laura laughed and said, "Compared to San Francisco, this is white bread." She read on. "'Poetic'—that's a woman, I bet—'free spirit, outgoing professional, average-looking, young-at-heart, romantic.'" Eyestones finished a "ripper" and wiped his chin. "A plain lonely person," he said. "See," said Laura, "you are nice when it comes to a woman." "Well, what do you want me to say," he laughed and asked, "Schizoidal substance-using loud bitch who is an ugly, toothless crone too repulsive to look at except in a dark barroom by candlelight?" Laura read out another one. "' Blond dude, 37, non-reader, surfs, political interests, Cape Cod area.'" "Bottom of the barrel," said Eugene. Laura looked at him. "But maybe he is good-looking with great pecs and a great package." She shrugged. "Who are you, Boob McNutt?" Then she read another, "'Hot guy into music. Plays guitar for up-and-coming band. Looking for explosive relationship.'" There was a rhythm of lewdness in the swaying cast Laura put into the reading of that ad. She approved. "That guy's on horny goatweed."

"He seems like your type."

She pushed out her bum and made kiss lips.

Laura said, "Sounds like an interesting Joe."

The lamest adjective in English, thought Eyestones, and the dumbest name. Why expect anything different?

It was only minutes before he realized after she read a few more examples that, astonishingly, every ad was hers, needy multifarious voices collectively identifying a single personal wail, any rejection of which constituted a sumptuous cruelty. Or was the fact that he noticed that about her part of his own destitution? Was she all limbic brain, Eugene wondered, drifting about and mooning in a maze of crossed motives for any male, not out of choice, but by some primitive or lunar or prelapsarian drive deeply embedded in the structure of resonating female neurobiology? It was as if in some affabulated way she never bothered to deliberate or discriminate for a minute. Nor was reason involved.

"You could *live* with that type?"

"What if you just grin and bear it?" Laura asked with that high, gummy smile. Eugene could actually *see* her heat, almost like a rattler licking the air.

"I find the two rarely go together."

She smiled. "Men are hot."

"And that teenage boy, Danny, from the neighborhood who came to my house that afternoon to thank me for taking him home from camp?"

She grinned. "Had a cute body. What, I'm gonna lie? I like . . . young boys, too."

A patrilocal understanding was hers, nevertheless; since high school, she flirted with men and visited men's houses and slept in men's beds and ate their food and talked to them and depended on them the way a mote, vagarious in flight, relies on air to keep afloat. Eyestones did not even believe that she was actually passionate but that she relied on sex for comfort from pain, for nurturing, for relief from stress, the way an alcoholic relies on alcohol or an addict on drugs. Abandonment or loss of a parent as a young child is common among sex addicts. As to her father, he knew she was angry with him, and she only occasionally mentioned that she had a letter from him. Her parents were as if dead to her, and it occurred to Eugene that children who do not mourn their parents often become depressives of the Laura sort, people who undertook virtually everything with an expectation of failure as a result. Was that why with almost ludic delight she discarded positive information and facts that did not fit her belief? Was it all the result of lovelessness? The way Eyestones got it, Laura could not believe that she existed only because men never looked at her with any joy. Was John Berger perhaps correct in pointing out that, while men look at women, women essentially tend to watch themselves being looked at—was it masochism?—turning themselves into objects of vision: *sights*? Her suffering, her disenchantment, was rooted not in being thin. She was erased. She was actually invisible. On the other hand, she who was such a troubling nest of improbabilities seemed repetitiously determined never to change, a nuttiness reminding Eyestones in consequence of an intriguing little riddle he heard as a boy:

> Q: What's the difference between a duck?
> A: One of its feet is both the same.

Eyestones hearkened back to the violin lessons he had taken as a little boy, the interminable hours, days, weeks, long exercises, stronger eyeglasses, an impatient instructor who spoke irrationally of his "contumacity," pulling fishy music out of a low mudhole of fiddle guts with a horsehair rod, memorizing techniques and endless rules, flights of le-

gatos and staccatos that filled a tiny schoolboy head, confused enough, reverberating already with scales, chords, counterpoint, theory, harmony. It was never easy. It was awful.

Laura spent almost all of her waking hours trying to avoid herself by going out to look for music at local clubs like the Kendall Café, the Lizard Lounge, the Middle East, TT the Bear's Place, Club Bohemia, Rhythm and Spice, Western Front, and Johnny D's in Davis Square, Somerville. She caught Ronnie Dawson at the Club Passim and went into raves about him. Sometimes she took the train into Boston, always alone, with never a friend in tow, neither man nor woman, to seedy Bill's Bar on Landsdowne Street for "Funk & Groove Night" to hear rockabilly. Getting off the T late, she'd several times been approached by a black man who, slipping out of a doorway, got bolder and bolder each time. It was Jamm the Wesort. "Hey, gooseknuckle, what, you come down to see me? Or checkin' out Fat ZZZ at the cluuub? Don't get me wrong, dude is ill on the mic. Can siing, yeah! Keep it crunk. It's only I be the bes'," he grinned, flashing a gold tooth, speaking what constituted a foreign language. "Ast my hood niggas, hey. Stop. Listen. Where takin' yo'self? I want yo' ass, mama. Seewhumsayin? Sweet duck sauce, *mmm*-mmm! Toot zee roll!" She characteristically listened. It was typical of her. When her mouth smiled, her eyes rarely did, however, but still she grudgingly delayed. "Look, I got a Tech 9 in my pocket. Biggest gun there am." He slowed down. "Buy some crack? No dollars, no shorts, no discounts. Tell your frinds!" He stopped short altogether, ending with a shout, and with eyes glowing with a testosterone burn he pointed a long finger and yelled, "I'm gone freak dat booty, brat!"

Laura also spent a lot of her time hanging out around used-record stores or bookshops like the Slightly Red Bookshop in Central Square where she often went and stood around the racks, flipping through periodicals, reading 'zines, small, amateur periodicals written by and for the illiterate filled with insane poems, odd confessions, bad art, antisocial polemics, spidery drawings and gruesome cartoons. All of her behavior reinforced Eugene Eyestones's long-held belief in matters of the heart that the greater faculty of love lay not in passion but in *reason*, the solid trusting, continuous, feet-on-the-ground honor paid to the real thing. Ignoring that was, to him, a defective absolution we granted ourselves for our folly.

Although she realized that she was living a life that was aimless and imbecilic, shallow and ephemeral, it was her own impatience, strangely

enough, that produced those events that enraged her—perversely, her very own dreams that she killed by refusing to make them come true. It was a rage against herself, in short, that became the spite that fueled the rage in her. Laura lived in a pond of romantic disillusion, Eyestones saw, but it was a deception, a lie, engendered in and poisoned by her own cynicism that not only allowed for but actually created the premises from which she drew the false conclusions by which she feebly, daily, excused her own behavior! She was selfish. It was not complicated, not at all. Selfishness to her was simply the way the world worked. One of the first things, for example, that Eugene gave to Laura when she moved down to Cambridge was a small male canary whom they called Criminal after the name of a dim, idiotic novel by some hack named William O'Rourke entitled *Criminal Tendencies* that they once found for a dime, stained and cellar-damp, in the bin of a Salvation Army thrift shop, the pages of which she used, two at a time, for shit-flooring—but even that little bird she had thoughtlessly left in a draft by the window to die of exposure. She would get a check from her mother on occasion, only to reciprocate a month or so later with some gift of her own, poorly mailed in a slapped-up carton, of cheap perfume or Asian soup packets or boxes of wholesale white chocolate that she discovered on sale at Building #19. She was unable to extend herself on behalf of anyone or anything and, because of that, had not the slightest conception of the connection between love and sacrifice. In her life, she appeared only to alienate man after man, angrily approaching each, having a go at him, and then after a spell of her bad behavior, and no doubt his, in some kind of unhinged paradox of her rough nature coming to hate the men that she had chased away, for going!

It was watching her that made Eyestones, until he had seen Rapunzel, wonder whether love—healthy love, real love, honest love, true love—was in fact directed towards an individual at all. He began to feel that love, at least as she set the example, did not so much unify as actually diversify people. Was it not possible that what did in fact realistically unite people was hatred? The obsession to own them by whatever radical means came to hand? The desperate and often unhealthy clinging for identity? Insisting on loyalty? Demanding fealty? Pursuing detours? Wearing misadventure like a faith in a fallible god? Wasn't it ineluctably clear that he could not help her? Was it not also clear that by freeing himself from her, while encouraging her to be individual—to realize herself—that he himself could get back to what it meant to

grow as a unique being? What have I gotten into? Eugene again asked himself. Was Discknickers correct when he said, "She's a woman with the hair of a pythoness"?

There were lots of swings with her between arrogant preening and censuring self-hatred. She tried out personalities the way, for example, families named Koch, mad to poach it of obscenity and vulgarity, will pronounce it any other possible way than "cock"—*Coke, Cawtch, Coach, Chawk*, etc.—but had no gifts whatsoever of assimilation under any guise or the ability to sympathize beyond immediate and anyway fluid self-mirroring, which caused repeated failures.

Laura, who always went around with a suppressed form of hate eating into her, was constantly on the alert for signs to confirm that someone was trying to manipulate and to spoil her life, while the fact of the matter was it was she who was spoiling the lives of others. She was a highly edited person at first, but eventually in a rummaging nod to anger and envy, the rat in her, giving way, always squealed. She hated the arugula set. She was ongoingly suspicious of pretty women trying to mock her looks and feared men for trying to make her look silly. "I'm not wearing a chiffon tent-dress for anybody," she would say to Eyestones in a shop when he would suggest she could look better. "Those are not me—preppy jackets skeeve me! I hate those shoes." She did not feel at ease in social situations anyway, and attending a party no one ever looked less at ease. She was fox-sly, guileful, and had not the slightest gift for meeting people socially, something for which her parents had never prepared her. When she was blue or mentally troubled, as often she was, even among company her surly sneer, which her heavy use of lipstick exacerbated, a sort of labial slouch or sulk, immediately gave off a hangdog refusal and more than a whiff of unwelcome. She was dissatisfied with her job, with her roommates, with Boston itself, which of course was not New York, a city she claimed to know in depth—she often got lost the two times they visited there together—or San Francisco, a city about which she boasted she knew everything, from the cable cars to the poodles on Castro Street to Hip Sing Tong, the number one executioner of the Chinatown hatchet wars. Nothing ever seemed to please her.

Her darkness was a kind of dusk. She hadn't the passion for the preternatural; there was nothing of the Faustian about her, only low-level depression, a moping sense of guilt, and endless, endless, inner conflict.

Laura had a lot of "there-he-goes-again" stories about guys in the past with whom she had worked who irked her by ignoring her, irked her by bothering her, irked her by talking to her, irked her for not talking to her. She had a way of dealing with this. She always wrote about it in that small, witchy notebook she kept into which, sitting for hours alone, she would enter a potage of voluminous notes filled with self-defensive malarkey ("Once again he yelled at me," "I don't see why I have to put up with rudeness from anybody," "Yesterday I didn't finish my food and so guess what he . . .") about other's faults, lovers mostly, she told him, so that when any of her relationships ended, as invariably they did, she could be consoled in reading the notes back, the parrot returning to its owner the very echoes she accepted as dialogue. It was all drama. At such times she liked to have people wonder, even ask, what she was doing: it was an act that, in her mind, seemed to give her conviction. Removing herself to concentrate, she would usually scrunch down in a corner with an upraised pen—she was one of those people who held a pen with her thumb so completely folded around it that it actually covered her index finger—and record every last crotchet and complaint, real or imagined, that she could think of.

An irony resulted, however, for as she later read back her words on the unsavory pages a self-pity emerged that revealed her own personal loathing for herself by reflection and became by way of an unaccountable valorization the source of her own self-maiming and myopia. She hated the parrot she fed. It was not surprising that she eventually came to see as she pored over her words how her book pointed to a kind of schism, a disjointed one, that was going on within her. It was in a sense terrifying. Now she was asking to move in with Eyestones, demanding money from angry Warholic, and avoiding her obsessed crippled landlord, Micepockets.

Micepockets, a gaunt, wind-dried man, lived on the bottom floor of the three-decker on top of which were the rooms that Laura Warholic and her roommates rented. A pathetic little sign hung on the front door: *Keep door lachted.* The crippled landlord often spent the day drunk. He had worked striping streets and then shagging barrels for the city of Cambridge for decades until he was eventually able to go on disability and put down money on the house. He occasionally made money on the side now, whenever he could, fixing up vans and RVs and SUVs in his driveway, doing upholstery and cleaning them, illegally working out of his own home to avoid business taxes. He was secretive and mean

and vulgar, and most of the neighbors hated him. Although he had a wife and five children—all young, each noisy, most of them grubby and disheveled: Ella, Ida, Edna, Nella, and Elda—he burned to possess Laura, at least as far as Eugene Eyestones had understood it, after an initial affair had begun—one she always insisted she had ended—and haunted her comings and goings out of sheer jealousy, ferreting up and down the back stairs of the house and crow-hopping around the cellar like some insane and monomaniacal Rumplestiltskin whenever he thought he heard her with someone else. His relatively young wife, a washed-out, razor-boned slave with an old woman's face and canceled eyes by the name of Delia, was overworked, cooking, washing clothes, ironing, housecleaning, and tramping out several times a week with a net bag to shop for food. "It is of course none of my business, Laura," said Eugene, "but this person, your . . . friend, keeps coming around the office looking for you. Isn't he a psychotic? And fixated? And dangerous?" Laura rolled her eyes like a cartoon pussycat, but she concurred. "I won't disagree, OK?"

"And married?" She nodded.

"That doesn't matter," he said flatly.

She sighed.

"Don't you care?"

The fact was, Eyestones, who was often forced into saying euphemistic things to Laura like "You mean a lot to me" and "You're precious to me" and "I'm on your side," wondered if she were safe. He had seen Micepockets several times and thought him dangerous, like any other sweaty obsessive. A sawed-off runt, the landlord had the pencil mustache of a retail clerk and thin hair that formed a widow's peak on his forehead as well as a pronounced limp, the result of a short, wooden stump in his lower right pantleg. He was manic and urgent, and filled with the kind of angry, dark roosterishness often found in puny, cringing men who bombinate behind the feminine uncertainty of self that no one ever takes seriously. He had his excuse. He himself was an excuse. His nickname Curbstepper, cruelly assigned him at the office by the heartless for his mismatched legs and uneven step—one leg being longer than the other—sadly fit, too well.

"Why not take out a restraining order?" asked Eugene. It sounded ridiculous. The man lived in her building. The man *owned* her building.

"It's not that I'm not afraid of him." Laura twisted a small finger

ring. "I-I just don't want to hurt his feelings."

Eugene, who in spite of himself admired this probing and temporary kindness because he earnestly wanted to find something to care for in her, yearned not to hate her, as he too often had in the past, and yet even if unaware that she was protecting with venal and characteristic logic her low interest in keeping the rent down, as in fact it seemed she was, he had long ago reached the stage where he did not want to know anymore, which of course did not make him worry any the less about her.

His concerns extended even to the pathetic wife of the cripple whom he had seen several times in Central Square pawing some cheap jewelry at Wronarski's Pawn Shop, a place run by a cheap fat balding pigscratcher; at the Food Crypt, or as he and Laura called it, "Larva Town;" but mostly just disconsolately peering through the dirty side-window of the house whenever he went over there to leave a note for Laura. The woman had the small, abused face of an ocellated knot-bird and whenever he saw her she was usually shouting angry warnings and threatening imprecations about the River Street traffic to the five small children who were always tumbling on the stoop out front with their sugar-grimy hands and who, by the principle of *lucus a non lucendo*, came to be nicknamed in Eyestones's playful mind for their dirty little faces: Floury, Flinty, Denty, Sweaty, and Popcorn. He had seen so many waifs like them in Vietnam in the rice fields. But with a father such as that, what chance had they?

"Do you . . . care for him?"

"What?'

"I don't need to repeat it."

"You hittin' on all six, Moon Man?" she asked, ruffling her spaniel ears.

"It sounds like it."

"Are you *joking*?" Laura exploded. "He can send a valentine to his hand! And I don't encourage him, not anymore, not since I met you," Laura said, taking his arm. Her feldspathoid skin gave him an awful feeling. Her eyes, tea-colored, like bad topazes, behind her round owl glasses seemed sincere one minute, insincere the next. "Don't say that. I don't want that," insisted Eyestones, since he felt she was lying, and for her nymphomania only pitied her. "Please. I need you," said Laura. "Have you told *him* that?" She placed her hair behind her ear and slid her hand up his sleeve. She leaned up to him and kissed his cheek. She

had no fat on her body, and her bony fingers without proper insulation had the coldness of cutlery. Her cold nose, sharp as a blackboard pointer, seemed wet. She always seemed *wet*, he noticed. Wetness was a thing about her. Wetness and unhealth and ubiquity. Then suspicion. She saw evil and menace wherever she looked; he thought of the operative remark of Miss Marple, the detective: "I always believe the worst." Viruses never go away, they only hide in reservoirs of mist, in animals, even the hearts of men who care. Eugene closed his eyes and patted her arm. His default reflex was to disappear. He hated the dark shadow she'd shape, fate falisified, the way facts imprison information. His mind drifted to another place. A girl in a warm bakery waved at him in a sudden inner aurora of light. In his reveries, she was as tall and white as a moonlight rose, a person whose healing look alone had unthawed a heart that had for so many years been frozen. To him, as in a dream, they were spiritual beings having a human experience, not the opposite, and that made all the difference. "You are dear to me," Eugene offered to Laura, then shook his head. "But I can't . . . be with you. We have nothing in common. Nothing. It's a bad mistake."

"Don't *you* care?"

"I do. I've tried to stand by you."

She folded her arms and hoisting her head turned it to look into the middle distance.

"You mean a lot to me. I'm on your side," he earnestly pleaded, "but—"

It was the best he could say, regarding her raddled face and dead hair with its sharp guiches, which always hinted at the promise of sideburns. His was a vitiated state. A man who dreams of gold pans for quartzite poorly.

"I persisted in giving in to my temptation to suss out the status of your friendship with other women, not content to believe that you were committed to me in spite of all your gifts, calls, cards, time. That's it, isn't it?" There was suddenly a violent cast to her eye. "You can't forgive me for looking through your mail again, can you? Why won't I learn?" whimpered Laura, blowing her nose. It was a conclusion, not a question. Pure rhetoric. Wistful but without worry. "This near end-point of a failed relationship is so familiar to me," she said. "Rehearsing the awfulness in the past, every grim thing that happened, and continuing bad habits." She began crying and shredding her paper hankie. "I've been a bad partner, committing the supreme rudeness of

not respecting your privacy. My father read my journal once, and even all these years later I have hated him for it." She had indeed rifled his desk, read his mail, went on mercilessly in fits of jealousy. But Laura's main problem was she never listened. To herself. To her own heart. "If I knew what my problems were, I wouldn't have them," Laura would often repeat. But identifying anything was to volunteer to do something about it, which only turned evasion into guilt. Talk sense to a fool, he thought, and she calls you foolish. How could he help Laura? By leaving her alone, he felt.

Didn't Jesus in Milton's *Paradise Regained* also answer Satan by doing nothing? He did.

And so did therefore Eugene.

XVI

Je T'Aime, Moi Non Plus

Eugene did not love Laura Warholic. He did not want her, did not respect her. He did not desire her. The fact of the matter was, more than anything else he pitied her, and it seemed that to care for another meant more than anything else to be a custodian of that one person's losses and decline. He could see that she was deeply unbalanced. Cooperation defined his pity. Love is more than anything else sacrifice. True lovers yearn to forgive, welcome the chance to overlook faults, it may be said, virtually seek opposition in order to prove their love true and straight. When Eyestones saw to his dismay that his own intractable self-conversations led to no feelings of grace, he felt hostile to himself through pure intellection for not loving Laura. But he knew that, with her mind like a bagatelle game—little balls clicking around baffles—she did not love him. She never ran to him or jumped with joy or bear-hugged him or sang the "Ode to Joy." No, it was clear that she did not know what she herself wanted, this queen of the foreplay dissolve. But what about him? If he thought about love, as often he did, it was because he thought about life, and if in Laura Warholic he had maybe found the one person in all the world who incarnated all of the intricacies of sex, or crucially the absence of, the inability to, love, showing at least in what should have been there what was missing, all of the complications regarding the different kinds of love—*eros, agapē, amicitia*, and *caritas*—was it so desperately wrong for him to see her in

order to try to get to the truth of its, their, our many enigmas? Yes? No? If that was once his drive, the question no longer mattered. He felt he wanted to be free of her. But she was aggressive and tenacious, a gold medallist in the Redundancy Olympics who never gave up but only insistently repeated over and over again, "I need you. I need you. Don't desert me. I care for you so."

They were not with each other, but only adjacent. Paratactic. It was simply a question of "besideness," the sort of proximity of one finding oneself a partner in conversation merely by way of one thought following the next. It was with them as with a knot, where each loop, while engaged, actually prevents the other loop from disappearing, a self-interfering pattern. They were neither friends nor neighbors, merely abutters. But weirdly the self always has texture and design with the images it projects. Pity is a vice, not a virtue.

A profound if ongoingly irrational interantiphrasis connecting the two of them, the odd proximal incompatibility that uniquely allowed for a tangent between them, was also the source of that fertile, almost organic mutual aggression that, even if born of denial, yoked them in weird juxtaposition. And when did thinking thoughts ever alter fate?

It is almost impossible for those with a thinking heart to leave alone a person who has no friends, however. Laura was alone, and yet, while more than anything the rude unavoidable truth remained for Eugene that she was terrified to be alone, he knew she resented men for the hold they had on her libido, which, mocking her independence, was a living reproach to everything she did. She was never rational, brave, fastidious, exact, friendly, meticulous, cheerful, clean, precise, orderly, accurate, loyal, constant, disciplined, scrupulous, particular, kind, or faithful. Her thousand resolves meant nothing. Not a thing. She subverted herself by the refusal to go out of her way for anyone, even at times herself. Because she believed in nothing, she believed in anything, which left her just as directionless. Whenever, for example, Eugene broached on the telephone any subject that involved Laura having to take a serious look at herself, her sudden anger was succinctly expressed. "I gotta go," she would declare and hang up. When she was abject, it could be even worse. It led to the kind of conversations that happen endlessly among acquaintances but never between friends or confidantes in which they were each not so much saying one thing but thinking another, wondering in what the other was thinking if there was a scintilla of awareness of themselves, a deliberating shortcut that

always made for the longest distance between two points. When, two-faced, spiteful, grudge-holding, shallow, she had in the past brought out his own anger, Eugene felt immediate regret. Always use persuasion rather than force, he told himself; was not that the crux of the old fable where on a wager Mr. Sun, by warmth, bests Mr. Wind, by bluster, in getting that wandering fellow to take off his coat? True, he often made her cry by criticizing her bad traits, but he soon came to realize that whenever he tried to cheer Laura up, his complements, weirdly, paradoxically, made him hate her, which then made him realize that we are demoralized as much by our lies of charity as we are from those of venal deception. Complement your mother's fatuous hat and take a gulp of deceit. Did not Kant assert that *every* lie is a sin?

But is it not alternative itself that has turned us all into liars? Adam and Eve foundered first and only when they had a *choice*. What do you tell a person to encourage him or her where no encouragement seems right?

Why don't you draw? Eugene was going to ask of Laura when he stopped, suddenly recalling her woeful absence of skill and her many fractured pencil drawings and sketches. She had no talent. Zilch, zero, not any. Her meager and unfulfilled art had been a sore point all these years. She had neither the gifts nor the temperament to draw, although in a certain mood she could spend hours idly porping through an afternoon with a 5 x 7 pad looking for a subject and making for herself the kind of day she imagined preoccupied Mary Cassatt. At different times she tried scatter art and ready-mades and painting ceramic dishes but nothing ever surfaced. "I think this is a good rendering," Laura would say, using one of her favorite art-school buzzwords, after an afternoon down on the Charles embankment with her sketchpad in her lap, looking at the river or a tree or a boat, pausing at intervals with that canted, phonily estimative, pondering sidelong head—sourcing an angle—that is suppose to indicate a deliberating eye but then later showing Eugene a fistful of poor, spidery, unreticulated smudges, cross-hatched with insanity, with each loop a noose and every particle a distortion bordering on dementia. It was all of it a dynamic fiction. What art solved for her, Eugene thought he knew. It was an activity taken up that she hoped would grant her some uniqueness. She so despised the petty, piddling, middle-class, narrow-minded, it's-not-polite-to-point, sit-up-straight, no-mixing-striped-shirts-and-checkered-jackets conventionalities, however, that the counterweight she adopted became in the overcor-

rective pose just as petty and unbearable. In another morphing mood characteristic of Laura, she positively hated enthusiasm in anyone, as if it took something from her. It was disturbing to see how she felt contempt for energetic plucky young-women-in-a-hurry types, feeling by way of her constipated heart that the very act of their getting ahead diminished her. A young woman named Wendy, her boss in a previous place that she had worked, was actually younger than she, which for no other reason invited upon her from Laura a mountain of derision. "She is talented, right. She's pretty, right. She is always on time, right. She wears just the right white blouses, right. She'll make the perfect wife, don't you agree, hon?" It was no different with other colleagues in other towns in previous offices to which she constantly alluded with bitterness—Christine, Susan, Jessica, Shana, Andrea, Janine, and even men, Roddy, Neil, Dirk, David, you name it. "Oh, she's got a big savings account, too. But you don't have to be rich to be romantic, right?" grizzled Laura, shredding a paper hankie. "Total bull!"

"But can't you hear yourself?" Eugene said. "You're speaking to your father, not to me."

How blackly she refused others joy, harboring an undetectable but deep resentment within her, like the silver in film. Her constant belittling of female overachievers only made her look bad, revealing motives grounded in jealousy. Print on dull paper is far easier to read than on slick. She also always spitefully and dismissively referred to her roommates behind their backs as "dwarf adults" because according to her way of thinking it was only pathetic "dwarf adult types" who could become so enthusiastic about making up daily lists for the flat, relegating household jobs, and energetically throwing themselves into dopey little organizational *thingies*, such as whose turn it was to put out the trash or cook or bring in the mail or check for storage space in the cellar.

"I *wanted* to be talking to you," she pleaded. "Don't desert me You promised me you and I would go to New York City together. Well, can't we? It's my favorite place on earth. Please? Catch some movies? Go to some restaurants?"

"You just used the word *well*."

They had agreed it was a vile verbal tic Americans badly abused and that it should be avoided.

"No, I didn't!"

"You did!"

"Sorry. If I learn to speak better, *may* we go to New York?"

Her aversions were snobbisms, for the most part. It was wholly ironic, for example, that while Laura enjoyed eating, she would not lift a finger to learn how to cook. "What's that smell?" she would usually ask upon entering Eyestones's rooms. "Food," he'd reply. "And if you were willing to cook, you could save lots of money and wouldn't find yourself broke at the end of every month." She occasionally attempted to cook, but meals of the supermarket-magazine variety, unbearable things like potato soup, asparagus roll-ups, overnight fruit salad, Taste of Home sheet cake, grandma's green-bean medley, Make-Ahead Spinach Bake, cabbage-and-baloney casseroles with potato-chip topping, and wet lime-gelatin salad. Once she made bingo bread, whatever that was, which tasted like drywall. She once tried a tuna-macaroni toss and burnt it, and for birthdays had baked a few hard fist-sized cupcakes into which she placed candles, simultaneously providing, it turned out, delicious tallow for frosting. Eyestones taught her, or tried to teach her, how to cut chicken Chinese-style, and to make fried rice and Long soup. He showed her how to separate eggs and bake English "Maids of Honour" cakes and how to make a good omelet and how to trap air in butter when making cakes—"less butter," he told her, pondering her own thinness, "means that less air can be incorporated into the cake mixture"—and even how to make a delicious beef stew with Coca-Cola! He taught her how to gut a blue mackerel: two quick flips behind the gills on each side of the head in order to cut it off, find the hole in the back of the fish, slice it down the middle, whack out the innards, and pan fry. As a joke one day, at the end of a muddled lesson, Eyestones, laughing, in a unique culinary moment actually taught her how to *cook water*! "OK, now, this is aquacotta," he said, and had her combine:

5 cups of water
2 sprigs of thyme
¾ cup of parmesan cheese
3 tbsp. olive oil
5 egg yolks

"Now whisk the oil and cheese, cook over slow heat." Laura did as she was told. "Now tear up a few pieces of bread, put them into a bowl, and ladle your mixture over it. Yummy!" He tried to teach her how to do simple Vietnamese meals like *cha gio*, deep-fried meat rolls in

lettuce leaves, or *chao tom*, chopped shrimp placed on skewers, and tried as well to teach her pickling. ("Christ mentions both dill and cumin in the Gospels," he said. "Did you know that?") But Laura would have none of it. She usually cut her finger or threw out a key ingredient or burnt the food. Her not finishing food after being served it seemed balefully aligned to wasting food when cooking it, and for Eyestones wasting food was among mankind's very worst sins. Eugene explained to her how in Vietnam when in harm's way they often made meals in "steel pots"—their helmets—and lived on herbs. "We also used to make fried coffee: throw the grounds into a frying pan, add some water, swirl it about, and then just hold it over a wood fire. It isn't all that bad. A woman I knew over there . . . oh, it doesn't matter. I can honestly say with regret I will never again enjoy those olive-drab cans of pound cake, to which I have to confess I got hugely addicted. I used to make donuts. My battle company loved my donuts. I always made them after church on Sunday mornings for the chaplain, if," he raised a finger, "*if* he got the organist to play my favorite hymn, 'Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.' Want the recipe?

"1 cup of sugar, 1 cup of milk,
2 eggs beaten fine as silk,
salt and nutmeg, lemon will do,
baking powder, teaspoons two.
Then lightly stir the flour in,
rolling it out, not too thin,
carefully then drop the dough
lest you get burned not too low
into the fat that briskly tells
how evenly the doughnut swells;
check with care the time to turn
to fry to brown lest they burn;
roll in sugar, serve them cool."

He laughed and extended his hand. "Price, a quarter for this rule." "Sorry, Diablo Man," she said laughing. "I'll write it out for you for free." "Anything else?" she asked, looking comically bored. "I have only three comments about cooking in general," he said. "One, if you fry something and it doesn't taste good, you will never like it. Two, the greatest sin in cooking is flowery rhetoric. And three, black puddle-rats

are greatly overrated as haute cuisine! Not exactly beer-braised short ribs with salsify and chervil spaetzle."

"And now you're a vegetarian," Laura Warholic would sarcastically quip after each anecdote.

"We lived on *mohinga*, a Burmese fish broth, and mostly ate animal bones in the form of Jell-O," her told her one morning at breakfast. "Breakfast was more often than not captured VC rice and spare ribs from local pigs with 'survival sauce.'" "And now you're a vegetarian," said Laura. "I do remember several times outside Saigon—it was a true rarity—actually cooking peacock over a hot roasting fire. In the afternoon," he corrected himself. "Fires were prohibited at night." She repeated, "And now you're a vegetarian." "Right, right, it's true," he admitted, sipping his coffee. "I don't take bites anymore out of anything that has a face."

"Or a butt!"

They laughed.

"My only question is," he asked, holding up his cup of coffee. "What is *wrong* with the last drop?"

Came a pause. She said, "I don't get it."

Shaking off the matter, he leaned over and bussed her. It didn't matter. Very little of what he said registered at any time. Avoiding meat made a difference in health. Was that her problem? He wondered about the source of Laura's ripe body odor that emanated from her like a sheen—was it from stress? bad diet? some kind of medication? hormonal fluctuation?—and he wanted to tell her that avoiding meat not only made the breath sweeter, even one's perspiration, which at one time, he thought, might have dynamized their kisses which were almost perfunctorily 1940s and closed mouth, a dull bonk, but also probably cut down on the infections she often had that gave her that kind of bad-battery odor for which she was now gobbling down one or two acidophilus tablets daily but which, try as she might, did not seem to stop her chronic itching.

One afternoon when Laura walked into his rooms, looking doleful—he had learned not to ask why—Eugene was making grape catsup. "Will you give me a hand, Laura, and pour out two cups of vinegar? Over there, thanks. Now watch, see what I'm doing, OK? I'm adding two pounds of sugar to the grapes. I've strained four pounds of Concord grapes. See this pot of juice? And now a few cloves, one tablespoon each of cinnamon and allspice, and bingo."

"I'm going on unemployment," announced Laura.

"*What?*" asked Eugene, feeling defeated.

"Right."

An interval of silence held.

"Isn't that the same dodge you and Warholic always used in San Francisco?"

"It's my life. I can go my own way," replied the mistress of excuse aerobics, with just a note of false bravado in her voice she could not hide. Delusions to her were always more alluring than facts. "I'm tired of all that business-office shit. 'Teamwork!' 'Win-win resolutions!' 'Co-operative problem-solving!' 'Conflict-management!' 'Disagreement-resolving!' 'Bang for your buck!' Give me a break. 'The workplace'? '*The workplace*'? Jesus! I once had a short fat unmarried dork named Cathy for a roommate who worked at Pfizer Pharmaceuticals in New London, but because she had nothing else going for her she loved that kind of shit. Not me, OK? I may be bipolar or schizophrenic or whatever," she joked feebly, "but at least I've got each other." She fell into a chair in a sad, slumping way. "Haven't you ever read that poem by Frost? It fits me. The one about the road less traveled? I thought you knew poems. I thought you were supposed to be so smart?"

Going her own way, did she say? Then why was she here? wondered Eugene the geometer. Was this the parallel postulate where, given a line in a plane and a point not on that plane, one can draw through that point exactly one line parallel to the initial line, and had fated somehow connected the fun dots? Were both of them on the same pilgrimage to a different shrine? Or seeking the same shrine by different roads? And would those lines intersect in space? Meet up in infinity?

"Look, I agree," said Eyestones. "To need to shine, to be adored by the world, to crave its approval, to yearn to succeed by its terms, is, at least to me, one of the worst vices in life a person can have. 'Refuse to be famous,' I say. But how about coping? Your own growth? Personal dreams?" A morbid silence followed. He looked at her. "Are you—"

"What?"

He hesitated.

"*What?*"

"Being . . . taken care of?"

"By?"

He shrugged. "Someone."

"Look, enough is enough!"

"I don't think you understand. There is a big difference between a question and an allegation. Besides, the poem you're referring to—"

"I don't want to *discuss* it," Laura snapped and waved her hand. "I'm going."

Strange, he felt, sighing. Strange. The rules of an alternative universe remain mysterious.

"*Who are you*?" Eugene shouted after her.

That is when famously, jokingly, he asked her for the first time the identity question he made up that she neither then nor ever stopped to answer, "Are you Constance Quesnet—or Quonstance Cesnet?"

She was mercurial. It was as if at certain times they would be driving along in one mood, when all of a sudden another would abruptly take over, as if a car had jumped the divider with head-snapping suddenness. Benign disingenuousness. Malignant prevarication. I can be alone. I can't stand being by myself. I want to be alone. Solitude terrifies me. She was never who she *was*. No facepiece held. No persona lasted. In that sense, she was the great invader of her own privacy. Why? To punish her parents? Perhaps to broadcast to her mother and father, watching her by way of some sort of panopticon, that only by adopting an alias that she was worthwhile? To blame them by reverse-example for the precepts by which she was or wasn't raised? To vent her personalities as screen-tests? Was it in Malachi that it says we have to *grope* after the Lord?

Whenever she waved goodbye, even sardonically, an ungainly reach-up, she was always off-balance. But then, reflected Eyestones, so was he. He likened his own malady—trances fixing on an object, nervous intensity, divided interests, an insistent revulsion and disdain for society, the compulsion to read books along with the preference for art over life—to some kind of unhealthy character out of E. A. Poe whose passions, fixations, and obsessions were not of the heart but of the mind. Not of Laura, living and breathing, but as something of a dream, not of the earth, but as the abstraction of such, not as an object of love, but as some project or theme of the most abstruse although desultory speculation. Any flambeaux within him had squandered out. By withdrawing from engagement, he felt he could shape his observations and analytical skills. A Jew has five corners to his beard, he thought. Remove the emotions. Be ventriloquial. His enginery was distance.

She seemed to resist all attempts to rescue her. Was it from guile or undented innocence that she would laugh and say, "I'll get by"?

"With what?"

"A monthly check."

"From?"

"Government assistance, try?" Laura looked at him and added, "Captain Obvious."

"You call that money?"

"It's enough."

"What, to keep a midget in donuts?"

XVII
New York Girl

Of all her varied and multiple personae, Laura's pretense of knowing her way around New York City was to Eyestones the least bearable, worse than watching her desperately pigeon-winging herself from one project to another, often with retard strength, without plot or plan or procedure. Whether she had merely memorized data that she trotted out as enrichment for all didn't matter; affectlessness elsewhere now became plain arrogance: "Houston is pronounced Howston, not Hewston," pronounced Laura Shqumb Warholic from Wampsville, New York. "The D train goes to Coney Island," she said, dogmatically. "So does the F," said Eugene, shrugging, who although he had spent much of his boyhood and early years in the city—even studied there, living in poverty over a time—and wanted her to have her day in the sun, also thought that she should learn a few things herself. But not Laura, no way. She had transmogrified, as do, typically, many of the city's parvenus, interlopers, and johnny-come-latelys, into the Village Explainer. "I know this bomb-ass place for milkshakes," she would say and drag him four or five blocks only to come to a bewildered halt. "It used to be here. Damn, maybe it was over on 12th Street." Pause. "Anyway, want to see where I used to drink?" Then with a melismatic swoop she would head off in another direction where she was certain she did this or that. It could be tedious.

She said that she *knew* the East Village used to be called the Lower

East Side. She *knew* where the White Horse Tavern was. She *knew* how to get bargains at Bloomingdales' "save rails." She had all the jive down that only out-of-towners who have moved to New York City insist be memorized: that the World Trade Center had 110 storeys, the Empire State 102—"which has exactly 1860 steps," she added. "I remember because that happens to be Jeff's apartment number on Mass. Ave." "Who's Jeff?" asked Eugene, who had never heard the name before. He saw her cheeks suddenly flood in the embarrassment of her apophatic blunder: she had obviously mentioned a name she shouldn't have. Who knew what she was up to? Being a snob is a job, full-time work; so is hypocrite. Was this guy one of those hamwits in the record shops up in Newburyport who seemed to know her so well, one of those slackers who, after gauging the various risk-to-reward ratios, not having progressed twenty feet from her teenage self—only to become their mindless and pathetic simulate—she was still determined to meet? It did not matter to Eyestones who, after a quick train-ride up to Harlem, was now standing in front of an old brownstone on East 116th Street. He pointed. "I'll bet you can never guess who was born there," said Eugene. "On March 4, 1911." He smiled at Laura and said to her surprise, "My mother."

He had his own New York City, of course. There were places one went in moods. He loved the bookshops. He loved the dock views off the Lower East Side piers where in reveries he sat like the fictional Mr. Popper of Stillwater who was always dreaming of foreign countries. He loved Mott Street and its restaurants. It had often been his habit on occasion when he was in the city whenever any particular afternoon darkened or took on a pale, sun-sucked color, shadowless and uniform, to walk over to Saint Ignatius Church to the Chapel of the Sacred Heart, as he did on this day, walking with his typical explosions of eagerness that usually put him one step ahead of whatever companion was with him, where one of his heroes, Teilhard de Chardin—who, by the way, died and was no doubt resurrected on Easter Sunday on April 10, 1955—liked to say Mass. Laura Warholic's lack of interest constituted anything but a disappointing verdict if his taking it seriously depended upon it. Still, he had promised he would go to New York City with her, and he met his obligations.

One night from the top of the Chrysler Building he pointed out to Laura the stars in Orion, the star Formalhaut, the Crow constellation, and he indicated the "Doorway of Paradise," a configuration

also called the "Autumn Square" and the great Space of Pegasus that whenever he looked up high had always transfixed him. Laura, who insisted on staying with Eugene who wanted to go over to 16 Gramercy Park to see what had once been the home of the great Shakespearian actor Edwin Booth, did not understand what was so important about the man. She had decidedly even less interest in the homage, no matter how brief, that on each trip Eugene always paid to Marilyn Monroe by stopping for a minute at the spot at 53rd and Lexington where in the wee morning hours of September 15, 1954, outside the Trans-Lux Theater the famous skirt scene in *The Seven Year Itch*—he had once written a column in *Quink* specifically on the pretty actress and the color white—had been filmed with her wearing the famous white halter-top dress and Delman slingback shoes. Ironically, because of all the fan noise and applause by the crowds that had gathered there at even that bizarre odd-hour—which included, by the way, her Puritanical and disapproving baseball-player husband—the scene had to be filmed again later in a Hollywood studio. Eyestones's assessment of the actress was through her vulnerability, her defenselessness, her susceptibility to hurt, that wistful lack of confidence somehow always in evidence in certain souls not shaped by hardness to weather the ways of the world. At times, Eyestones did more than just stop. Sometimes he went out of his way to purchase a single bright anthurium or delphinium, Marilyn's favorite flowers, which in her memory he left on the spot.

"Why not genuflect since she was so perfect?" asked a nettled Laura, standing there on the busy sidewalk like a bird of the stiltlike wader variety. He ignored her. "Where's the Trans-Lux?" she asked. "Moellen," he replied, adding for clarification: "Rubble."

"Marilyn Monroe was *not* perfect. She was a kind and decent person," he explained as they crossed the street, "but was deeply flawed and had the bad judgment of anyone with low self-esteem. Imagine her believing that JFK would make her First Lady? She was a joke to him. When he was a sick young man in the hospital, he kept a pin-up of her in tight blue shorts with her legs spread far apart—and had it hung upside-down. Does that tell you anything of his view of her? They began an affair in 1954 that continued in his duplex penthouse suite at the Carlyle Hotel right up to her death. Perfect? She had a scar from a gall-bladder operation, an odd puttyball nose that she had bobbed, a surgical appendectomy scar that embarrassed her whenever she wore a bathing suit, and who knows what kind of internal mis-

plumbing from the thirteen abortions she had had before even reaching the age of thirty. According to photographer Burt Glinn, 'She had no bone structure—the face was a Polish flat plate.' She had a colorless mole near her cheek, white manufactured hair that she got touched up once a week with peroxide, a hairline reshaped by electrolysis, and beneath her lower gum had a crescent-shaped silicone prothesis inserted in order to correct her prominent chin, which forced her thereafter always to be photographed with an open mouth to give her face a softer line. Her sexy pout can be traced to a fault, then, in other words—a half-open mouth hid what a closed mouth revealed, a 'grouper chin.' An overbite orthodontia did away with. She was fitted for a retainer and had her teeth whitened when she could afford to do so after years of having a meager income. Surgeons reset her jaw. When she smiled, nevertheless, her upper lip went right up under her nose, and she had to learn to control it. Although the bully Joe DiMaggio, who physically abused her, always complained that she had 'a big rear end' and 'hair on her arms,' she wore a 36D bra but did *not* wear a size 16 dress as all those envious bitches claim, for we know that, along with Mrs. Grundy, every maudlin old piece of crockery hated her. She suffered from everything from endometriosis to depression to impacted gallstones. 'She had terrible elbows,' photographer Milton Greene's wife reported. Her knock-knees she felt to be her biggest shame. Doctors told her that they were in all likelihood the direct result of malnutrition she suffered as a child. She had weak ankles, a widow's peak, sometimes sported two chins, and once she even had a case of trench mouth."

They chose to ride out to Coney Island. "Hollywood owns people by way of altering nature," Eugene said to Laura. "I believe *fabrikoid* would be your word for it. Right?" *Women are seen as ephemeral*, he did not have the heart to tell her, *because their beauty is so brief.*

Laura said, "Phony will do."

"She wasn't a phony, merely insecure. I'm surprised that doesn't jibe with your essential faith: disposable values. Marilyn hated her ears, which according to her were thin at the top, 'like paper,' she complained. 'They don't curl over; they just sort of stand up. I never, never wear my hair pulled back if I can avoid it.' She told Truman Capote that she had 'fat hands.' 'My hands are like duck feet,' she once said. 'Big flat webs.' She thought her hands were too fat and rarely showed them. She had a spinal defect. 'A quarter or half-inch of shortness in the bone structure of my left side,' she told her half-sister, Berneice

Baker Miracle. 'It makes me walk funny,' she said. It is widely known that she preferred not to have her feet photographed. She never liked her legs, which being crooked, according to her, meant that her buttocks swayed when she walked, which is why she insisted on exaggerating it by always wearing skintight skirts. She never properly learned how to swim, 'the only awkward thing she ever did,' said Arthur Miller. She'd cluelessly drink milk at formal dinners where other guests were drinking—usually at her own expense—bottles of Lafite-Rothschild. I won't even bring up her misery and loneliness she found almost suffocating during her entire childhood and adolescence. Only five-feet-five and a half inches tall, raped at the age of eleven, finding nothing and no one permanent, perpetually terrified of madness, a victim of an endless parade of men, and so emptied of anything like self-esteem she would often travel under the derisive name of 'Zelda Zork.'"

Laura hocked out a laugh.

"She was sensitive. A Reform rabbi once terribly swore to her there was no afterlife. It almost *killed* her! Not a single one of the many photographers who shot her and of course made millions off her ever sent her a thank-you note. How do you reckon that would affect someone with any kind of sensibility? She never had a great role in a great film. To me she was too often paired with sexless freaks and stick-figure droolies and mock-lotharios. Maybe if she had played opposite real men, she might have appeared like a real woman. Joe DiMaggio once didn't speak to her for ten days—the silent treatment. Passive aggression. He was a bastard. He hit her, several times, punched her out. He was vain, as well. 'I hated it,' he said of spring training. 'I never needed it.' She missed few ordeals. But Marilyn Monroe refused to give up." Eyestones wanted Laura to hear and to know and to feel this. "She used to stand in front of a mirror and sing to herself, 'I Believe in You'—something she did in order to grow."

"A goddam strawhead."

"Not at all."

"She talked like a blow-up doll," muttered Laura Warholic scornfully. "A nice body, but no brain—a $400,000 airport but," she tapped her temple, "a $10 control tower. I've read that the first time that she ever signed an autograph as 'Marilyn Monroe' she had to ask how to spell her first name. Plus—"

"Plus what?"

"She committed suicide," said Laura with a huff. "You call that not

giving up?"

"She did not take her own life," said Eugene. "She was murdered." Eyestones grew quiet. A memory assailed him.

He had a waking vision of another pretty, selfless creature, an actress who as a young girl had gone from New York City to Hollywood and appeared in several movies, married, and eventually gave birth to two boys over the years before that day they lost her, when in 1957 she was struck and killed by a streetcar in Hartford, Connecticut, a tragedy his father never got over. He had memories when he was a little boy of four of her in a soft, pink sweater sweetly singing to him "The Girl That I Marry," of her soothingly warm hands, of the lilacs she loved, of the meals she cooked for him, of the seascapes she painted, of the Shalimar perfume she wore, of the miscarriages she had, of the Cocilana cough syrup she offered him in big spoonfuls whenever he was ill and had to stay home from school, of the time he had almost died from measles and how she had sat by him for whole days while he convalesced. She was not religious and attended no services. She once gave him, along with a picture Bible on the Christmas of his ninth birthday, an apothegm regarding church that "If it doesn't do you any good, it can't do you any harm," a somewhat negative judgment that, oddly enough, had the reverse effect of instilling in him a fascination with theology all his life. She was not without a certain ironic or whimsical, even macabre, turn of mind as Eyestones learned when she once drew his young attention to a small pink birthmark on his knee; it might come in useful one day, she had observed, if ever she had to identify his body, a remark he was probably not meant to remember, although it is hardly suprising that he did. Recollections rolled into place in his mind like pinballs. No large part of the planet's surface is exactly horizontal. But what is memory? Was what stayed with us in our minds alone what mattered? Is it only what we remember remembering? He thought of her deep love for her Italian father, of the museums to which she took him, of her endless patience, of the days she spent with him, a myopic little boy, in one fiendish eye-infirmary after another, of the music lessons she encouraged him to take and, most of all, of that memorable summer when, taking him along with her, she bought him his very first violin, which she wittily referred to as Mr. Practice.

How he loved his mother! She could act and play the piano and draw like Edmund Dulac. Best of all, she always read to him from magic volumes of moving shapes and shades that even in his adult life

still strode through his imagination. She read him when little *A Child's Garden of Verses* (The Land of Counterpane!) and *The Mysterious Island* by Jules Verne—how he loved the Wyeth painting of the Wild Man of Tabor Island!—and Gene Stratton-Porter's magical *A Girl of the Limberlost* in the pages of which he'd heard the very first references in his life to the violin. Regarding that book, he would never forget how the one line in those pages—first moments matter most—imprinted on him and effected him so: "There's no sense in the world in your not having a violin!" He could still quote whole passages from stories and poems from Kipling and Lear, Stevenson and Twain, and recite from those old illustrated children's books from which his mother read to him by candlelight such as "The Leak in the Dike" by Phoebe Cary,

> And the boy! He has seen the danger
> And, shouting a wild alarm,
> He forces back the weight of the sea
> With the strength of his single arm!

and "The Quangle Wangle's Hat" by Edward Lear:

> And at night by the light of the Mulberry moon
> They danced to the flute of the Blue Baboon
> On the broad green leaves of the Crumpetty Tree
> And all were as happy as happy could be,
> With the Quangle Wangle Quee.

and of the legendary cruelty of the vicious cleric in Robert Southey's terrifying "Legend of Bishop Hatto" and how the fierce, unappeasable rats ate his bones:

> Down on his knees the Bishop fell
> And faster and faster his beads did tell,
> As, louder and louder drawing near,
> The gnawing of their teeth he could hear.

Returning from bleak Coney Island, empty shell and shadow of its former self, they got a call from Discknickers to meet him for lunch the next day—he often flew to Manhattan to buy ties and to order custom-made suits and shirts there, nothing of course but bespoke clothing for

him—and they decided on an Asian restaurant in the East 60s. Eyestones who well knew Discknickers and how he abominated the kind of charm he disdainfully regarded as evidence of weak, chronic temperamental transgressives said nothing of his shopping. Discknickers was cynical as a way of life. Nobody who did not know him personally ever loved him, and those who knew him well in the wit missed—or refused to mind—the misery. Laura who wore her best black sepal earrings for him, even a dress, casually dropped the fact that they had visited that famous spot filmed in *The Seven Year Itch* where a laughing Marilyn Monroe, standing over a subway grate, watched her dress blown up by the gust of a rushing train. "In the film Monroe's billowing skirt goes barely to her knees," said Discknickers, lighting up a Cohiba Robusto, "lest anyone be shocked." Eyestones nodded and said, "Added to which, it all had to be re-shot later back at the Fox Studio in Hollywood because, so much was revealed, the noise of the crowd was deafening."

Amused, Discknickers fabricated crowd sounds, ventriloquating in time-honored theatrical tradition the words "rhubarb" and "vichysoisse."

Invidiously impatient with the topic but trying to keep her voice casual, Laura cattily remarked, "I thought it was because she was too dumb to remember her lines." "Are you certain it was Fox, Eyestones, and not MGM—*Meyer ganze mishpoche*?" asked Discknickers, who sipped his cup of saké and leaned back. He was into his fourth drink. He had grown uncharacteristically rumpled and looked as though he had combed his hair with a pack of firecrackers. He nodded with cold amusement in the direction of a table of Hassids. "Welcome to the planet of the Yids. What filth. Thin sneaky eyes. Bushy beards specked with bits of yesterday's food. A stench." He took a long pull on his expensive cigar. "I refuse to walk on the same street with them. I see over there the equivalent of human anaconda who *squeeeeeeze*!"

Discknickers shook his head in disbelief and muttered, "Imagine Alfred Hitchcock in *North by Northwest* trying to fob off on the gullible moviegoer—clearly an obsequious sop to hebraicized Hollywood, but talk about a stretch of the imagination!—even the possibility of someone mistaking thin, elegant, handsome, downtown Cary Grant in his silk tie, white shirt, and that perfect blue suit for some ethnic weasel with the name of *George Kaplan*?"

To change the subject, Eyestones with reinterpollating laughter

tapped Laura's nose and said, "Marilyn Monroe was not dumb. Far from it. She was a willing stooge in order to try to get ahead and often mocked the low self-esteem she knew people had of her." He looked at Discknickers. "Remember that famous exchange often played from a 1953 *Jack Benny Radio Show* on CBS—the two of them were supposed to be alone on a ship—and Marilyn lovingly cooed, 'Oh, Jack I never dreamed it could happen to I,' and he responded in kind, 'Neither did me'?"

"It was a homeowner's wit."

"She was aware. Mostly."

"It was the Jews who brought down Marilyn Monroe, like a young eland savaged by dirty jackals," Discknickers said. "Scheming agents. Banana-nosed moguls. Horny producers. Cheap-jack photographers. Fake drama coaches. Pig publicity men. Idlers and interviewers. Actors. Deviants, dykes, and directors. Trolls. Every last thieving weasel in Hollywood without pathos, character, or ethics. 'I have known more Jews than I can count,' she dolefully told Dr. Ralph Greenson in that last confessional tape of hers that she left and that was found after her death. She was too trusting but eventually despaired of them all for their crude and exploitational savagery, Jews to a one! Read the books. They were all on top of her, with flapping wings and collops of meat in their pecking beaks, tearing her apart like buzzards, condors, ravaging hawks. Fat Sam Spiegel, that slob of slobs. Tony Curtis, Arthur Jacobs, Norman Rosten, Milton Greene, Arthur Krim, Henry Rosenfeld, smarmy Harry Cohn, Robert Slatzer, Yves Montand—Yves *Levy* Montand—Natasha Lytess, Jerry Giesler, Arthur Miller, Charles Feldman with his toupee, Mickey Rudin, Anna Mizrahi, all those Sterns—Burt and Gerald and Mickey—who photographed her but not one of whom ever gave her a cent, not a penny, hoodlum Bugsy Siegel—yes, the Las Vegas thug himself—Ted Jordan, who was born Edward Friedman, and his uncle, comedian Ted Lewis, another creepy Friedman who changed his name, even the physically repulsive Joseph M. Schenck (pronounced 'skank,' as in *skunk*), aka 'Kid Varicose,' that hideously decrepit old Jewish mogul in New York City whom she had to blow when she was practically a baby in order to get a part in *Ladies of the Chorus*—'I think he's probably the ugliest man I've ever seen or touched,' Marilyn always said." Discknickers gulped his drink and immediately ordered another. "Sadly, she had long ago lost the faculty of hoping and saw the bestiality of others as a condition of the earth,

never mind getting ahead. Desperation, which became the sole form of her celebrity, was an aphrodisiac to the creeps and crones ready with knives and forks to gorge on her, all of them exploiting her like a drill, plagiarizing each other with their ham-handed but obvious lust. I gotta tell you, of all the vile things on this planet, spare me the energetic Jew. They pursued her like a detour and ran her to ground. Tell me something, Eyestones, when doesn't more mean worse?" He blew a ball of smoke and leaned forward. "When doesn't more mean *worse*?" he repeated, convinced utterly that his instinct for what was correct was fully ungainsayable. The truth could fit only through a narrow pass for him. He brooked no disagreement and if he thought you were wrong which he always suspected never let you finish a sentence. "They were all involved, you name it: Shadrach, Meschach, Abednego, and all the *ganze machers*, the vulture list is endless, including the biggest raptor of all, the grice-fingered Rabbi Edgar Magnin who with traprock for a heart and an eye to the main chance not only converted her to Judaism but capped it off publicly in a charade of bogus religiosity by dunking her in the fucking Hollywood Basin!

"Think of the irony—a last wolfish impiety over what they ate after they killed it!" said Discknickers, expert on invidious distinction with his cold insight into painful sham. He adjusted a cuff-link. "The final meal.

"These were all golem, Eyestones, money-golem, human dreck fashioned from the glutinous mud of the river Vltava, mindless devouring trash animated as much by cash as by lust, all unformed base chthonians deaf to ethics with countermanding adder-eyes and all saliva-white like the big dumb prototype forged from pigshit by the magician Rabbi Loew, leader of Prague Jewry!

"Oh but Lee Strasberg—*drachenblut!*—was the high priest of greed! The whole family, black buzzards perched on her bones. Susan Strasberg. Johnny Strasberg. That horrendously fat, shameless idler of a mother, Paula Strasberg, who with her fat bingo wings wobbling under her arms was the size of a Chickering piano! In the end, that mendacious piece of trash was extorting huge sums of money from Marilyn for merely talking to her or going for a walk! A conversation? *Ka-ching*! Any advice? *Ka-ching*! A stroll across the street for bagels? *Ka-ching*! Lee Strasberg, a hustler born in a ghetto in Budzanow, Austria, schemed the poor girl's insides out for years with a scalpel of cant! Crippled her! Made her dependent on him. All of that Method-acting jargon and

guileful *Bodenlosigkeit*? Black fukrot! His corkscrew of a heart had more crooked twists in it than a Judas tree. He was a crocodile, the most vivid proof in humankind of Tennessee Williams's remark that 'Hell is yourself'! After Marilyn died in 1962, the Strasbergs, who were more devious than hell-trolls, squirreled away all of her possessions later to have them all hawked on the auction block at Sotheby's for a fast bundle. For years Marilyn had subsidized that family, paid for their personal expenses, for pleasure vacations, gave them cars, jewelry, clothes, books, expensive dresses, her diary, various keepsakes, gave them *power*, above all, even covered Strasberg's enormous stocks and bond losses, offering him out of pure misguided charity tens of thousands of dollars, which he *took*! I would like to feed him his wife to eat between pieces of Sidney Skolsky's head!

"She was fed on, gnawed on like a bone, as it were, by all of those jackal-hearted monsters set in motion by the carrion stink of fame and her increasingly disintegrating impoverishment!" Discknickers angrily crushed out his cigar in a dish. "The nihilism of repletion. Black desperation. Endless fear of madness. On the brink of electric lunacy all her life. Everybody exploited that woman—and made her *love* it! As meat loves salt. It wasn't only that all her life she ached to get into people's affection. She was overripe with neediness and didn't have the sense God gave a duck. It did not matter that among others she shone like a banana in a smokehouse. She lived out of crowded apartments, gumping meals in low greasy spoons and openly trusting the most rapacious weasels on the planet who, fully confirmed in her disadvantages, not only swamped and engulfed her but in the end were wilder than she was to get their name in front of the public. They drove iron nails into her head. Her ills filled sidereal space. No wonder that she was a chronic stutterer." Discknickers looked up. "Were you aware that because she was still under contract as a stock actress when she starred in the film *Niagara*, she literally earned less money for her work than her very own make-up artists did? Accepted the caprice? With a plaintive lack of astonishment and zero sense of self-worth let the shortfall go? After Marilyn had carefully X'ed out several weak photographs she disapproved of—such as, for example, that notorious Bert Stern photo taken for *Vogue* at the Bel Air Hotel in Los Angeles, which with legitimate pride she specifically insisted never be printed—Stern, always looking for the main chance and connivingly temporizing, merely bided his time until the actress was dead, and then before

she was cold in her vault proceeded to hawk twenty-five prints of that very same photograph, blasphemously calling the shot *Crucifix Marilyn*, for $15,000 apiece! Without the paralysis of analysis, that is not Jew work? That is not the thieving, advantage-taking, rush-into-the-breech-during-the-dark-of-midnight hustle typical of the kike mind, that in the end is forced to march up to the mind's tribunal and confess 'I suck'? I could not possibly list all the mendacious shitwads and unconscionable scum and thieving ratfuckers who, taking complete advantage of the woman, stuck to her like remoras. Walter Winchell. Doctor Greenson, Jerry Wald, Richard Avedon, Groucho Marx, the agent Johnny Hyde—his real name was the onomatopoeically grotesque Ivan Haidabura, son of Russian Jewish tumblers—Otto Preminger, oh Christ, on and on, and then of course the vampirish Strasbergs, each of whom smelt out like sniffing hyenas the dependence in her despair, the better to gnaw out her vitals. They defiled her with their lying tongues and paddling fingers and hairy asses. They plagiarized themselves in their filthy but predictable duplicity. All gall conceals revenge. I can assure you, Eyestones, that it is not an accident that it was the Jews who invented the word *chutzpah*. As I say, much to my astonishment, surprise, and yet if I may say so without additional offense, considerably to my amusement," he cavalierly mock-bowed to Laura, "Marilyn Monroe later mythotypically converted—the final ignominy—and *became* a Jew! Does that tell you anything?" He poured himself another drink and looked up. "The victim always kisses the Tartar's hand before being flogged.

"I agree with that old Viennese parliamentary deputy Ernst Schneider when he said that the Jewish problem could be solved by the baptism of all Jews"—he wet a finger and tapped the air—"adding 'But I would immerse them for the full duration of twenty minutes.'" Turning to Eyestones, he drunkenly laughed. One sensed the hardened pain and rage beneath the laughter, a rage that was easily triggered. It was a rage anchored as a kind of weight in his *Selbstbeherrschung*, an iron self-mastery that refused anyone the chance to prevail against it. Always there was the same recursive, self-referential argument he seemed to be having with himself. "Unfortunately, as you can see, I suffer the curse—or is it a gift?—of never failing to notice how utterly awful and vicious Jews are, something the average dim-witted herbert-in-a-hat in the United States does not. Most people in this country couldn't find the city of Tel-Aviv on a table map if it had light bulbs under it! What

is the matter, Electrical Engineering, all of this too forthright for you? Too frank? I am *too* right, correct? Who was it that over the course of more than two thousand years lent money to the very governments who treated the Jews worse than dogs? Why, it was the Jews *themselves*! Executioner and victim alike, each half accusing the other of deceit! Talk about a case of factitious disorder! They're a two-thousand-year-old toothache! Scum! Weevils devoid of social morality! Money-grubbing newts!" He raised his cup high. "H. L. Mencken was correct!" he exclaimed, quoting, "'They have vanity without pride, voluptuousness without taste, and learning without wisdom'! Intriguers! Vermin! The tapeworms of civilization! Trotskyites—"

"Oh please," put in Eyestones. It was insulting. He was drunk. They had become the cynosure of all eyes.

"Hey," came Discknickers's parting shot, "when you see Harriet Trombone, ask her if she will sign my box of pancakes, will you?" Eyestones excused himself, took Laura by the arm, and they quickly left.

As they walked about the city or took a train up to Columbia or a cab downtown in subsequent days, Laura would often quelch Eugene's enthusiasm with a restless want of contentment— less with an aggressive bang than a calculated whimper—most of the time unaccommodatingly looking in almost exactly the opposite direction from which, for whatever reason, he happened to be pointing. It was important to Laura, submitting essentially willful personal needs to wearier unrefinements, that she have autonomy in the particular places where she had once lived, and he thought all right, fine, it was good for her to have a sense of reinforcement. But it could be tiresome, and even painful. She who was so socially awkward and prone to self-deception was full of trivial facts she felt alone validated her and would not be dissuaded. It was harmless and did not matter to him. It was also quite comical. "Washington Square Park? In the southwest corner, I know, I know, that's where they play chess and stuff. I've seen it, OK? Yes, I've been to the Fulton Fish Market, of course!" she would exclaim in full fettle. "Prince Street Station. I used to know a big fat bald guy who used to send me mail from there and is now doing major time in Attica, the fat fuck, for selling porn through the Internet to pre-teenage girls! He used to live in San Francisco. I used to see him getting in fistfights at clubs. He thought he looked like Oscar Wilde, excuse *me*, more like Oscar Wilde after forty years of sucking helium out of a blimp! Oh, I love the New York Public Library. See, over where the lions are? People

come from all over the world to take books out of there." *Except that this is a research library and taking books out is not permitted*, thought Eugene Eyestones, who had not the heart to correct her. She was a bottomless fund of snatched facts and insignificant figures. The tour guide had taken over and was in full report. The city has always been Oz to those from the tall grasses. Ranger from the Adirondacks! Get me out of Weedville! Pure cabotage. Andy Warhol's silvered Factory stood at East 47th *but* later moved to the whole sixth floor of 33 Union Square West. She knew that, OK? There was CBGBs, Max's Kansas City once stood down the street, and she was sure that over there, see, by that Ray's Pizza, was once the location of the Bottom Line. At least it used to be. Oh, Lord & Taylor's had the *greeeaatest* Christmas windows, the American Wing at the Met was far and away the best, and the Chelsea Hotel, where Sid killed Nancy, was that big-ass redbrick building over there on West 23rd. The Frick, well, everyone knows where that is, right, and the Guggenheim, which incidentally Frank Lloyd Wright—

"I know, I know," Eugene would say at times of fatigue, taking her arm and moving along, ad-libbing a poem or something or singing to her about the eternal quest:

> "I got drunk one night in the Bells of Hell,
> looking up and down for the Absolute,
> and failing to find it, truth to tell,
> refused to accept a substitute."

Laura spoke of her wild days. She seemed to need to invent past fun. She avoided any stories about an alienated rube in a straw hat from Wampsville, New York, taking the Pathfinder down from Syracuse to the big city and instead much preferred tales of going out at night to various West Village boîtes and candy-bar clubs with fussified dress codes—fetish, cyber, nerd, anime, eclectic, etc.—in the kind of hip, anything-goes atmospheres she loved. From what he understood, it was as if upon the instant of her spotting desirable guys, they, like raptors, with all their cunning species-specific foraging specializations, also simultaneously picked up her reek—except that the next day she found herself always deserted. "I love lounge," he remembered her crowing with that big grapefruit smile of hers and that nutty Una Merkel face from *42nd Street*. She seemed to forget the fact, if she ever knew it, that she was in fact one of those more-self-despised-than-anything bridge-

and-tunnel people from the five boroughs, never mind from upstate and its purlieus, whom people in such clubs in Manhattan so looked down on and almost always turned away at the door.

"I thought you were poor when you lived in New York City," said Eyestones.

"I was flat broke," said Laura, twisting a noil of her hair dyed so maroon it made the hairline of her brow look hard and schoolmistressy. "That doesn't mean a girl"—she smirked—"can't have friends, does it?" They were in a corner eating lunch at Chumley's down on Bedford Street, one of his favorite restaurants with its walls covered with book-jackets and writers' portraits: Dos Passos, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Cather. Dorothy Day had been a founding member of a socialist writers' club that began there in the 1920s. The New York City that once intrigued Eyestone—who was a great wanderer of the city like Little Joe Gould, Joseph Cornell, Marsden Hartley, and Ben Katchor—had long disappeared, the noisy, sooty, old-city jigsaw of a place, a city of fedoras, with its ethnic neighborhoods, venerable and old drink-and-dine establishments like Rector's, Shanley's, Reisenweber's, the Astor, the Gilsey House, Delmonico's, Churchill's, Sixth Avenue Jack's, Magoun's, and the Café Royale on Second Avenue, the old city with the real Mamie O'Rourke-stuff like dark theatrical alleys, smudge-pots, old Chinatown, the shipyards and fishy docks, the world of burlesque, Broadway shows, steaming hot dogs, diners, coffee-vendors, organ-grinders, and signboard-men ambling about. It was a vanished world. The Merit Lunchrooms and Chock Full o' Nuts and Hayes Bickfords. The Automat pies and train-station Danish and ingenious Nedick's fountains spouting bug juice into the air.

Where, he wondered, was the Famous Door that stood on 35 West 52nd Street? The Savoy Ballroom, "The Home of Happy Feet"? Theaters like the Bronx Opera House at 149th and the Alhambra at 126th? The old Waldorf Astoria? Or Small's Paradise in Harlem? Connie's Inn? The Cotton Club? Leroy's at 135th and Fifth where, it is said, in its thirteen years of operation—1910 to 1923—only one white man was permitted to visit, Al Jolson? Where was Rappaport's, always smelling of borscht and eggs and gefilte fish? Or Ratner's, the price-gouging kosher dairy restaurant on Delancey Street on the Lower East Side that overcharged everybody like twelve dollars for lox and eggs and a dollar extra for onions?

Old New York City. Flown. Gone the colorful old penny arcades

where you could drop a copper penny into a tall machine and watch running men. Gone the street dumbwaiters and ragmen and peripatetic knife-grinders and damp blasts of subway air he remembered as a boy. Gone the Third Avenue El. Gone the third-floor walk-ups and tenements and wooden freight elevators. Gone the liquory breezes from the dark bars and the streetlights with corrugated tin crowns and the broken cobble. Gone the sepia-toned streets of his memory and old car-barns and mentholated gents' rooms and quaint slot-machine photo booths and large drafty automats. Gone the egg-creams and pizzas big as a manhole cover, and orange soda, the drink of the day, which was once drunk in long, heavy, glass bottles like rockets back in the old days when, as the lyric goes, the smell of the rain-washed pavement came up wet and thick and cold.

Laura said, "I lived in Queens. Astoria."

"And alone, with a 'dopey roommate,'" said Eugene. "Isn't that how you put it?"

"Not always, Cookie Chips," Laura remarked with a smirk. "There was one guy, an auto-shop owner. Red-haired. He had a big—"

The pause was pregnant.

"I'm impressed," said Eugene. "You are so worldly and debonair."

"His name was Red Cross."

Eugene offered, "Help in an emergency, so to speak."

"Exactly."

"Fascinating."

"He had spending money. What does it matter? He jilted me, OK? Just like that guy in Prague I met, Thierry, except that him I really liked. Auto-man was crazy, anyway. As a sideline, I kid you not, he used to fix and clean up old carburetors and sell them as menorahs! He was oversexed and needed to do it all the time. He was into porno wicked. The first time we had sex he tied my hands to the bed-frame, stuck two barbiturates in my mouth, and poured Wedding Bells champagne all over me! Another time before we did it, he rubbed a gooey rice cake all over me—you know? The kind eaten on Japanese New Year celebrations?" "Mochi," said Eugene drily."He had three buddies, Joe, John, and a spaz named Jeremiah—I screwed them, too." She gave him a glassy grin of unconcern. "He demanded that I wear all kinds of crazy shit like seamless pantyhose and crotchless bodystockings and lace-top thigh-highs. He used to like me to bend over," she squealed, "and suck his toes with my hands held behind my back! And balance backwards

on a sofa like a seal with a shoe in my mouth. Don't even ask! 'Gotta load in the dryer,'" she said, growl-imitating his sex talk. She laughed out loud. "Friggin' in the riggin'!" Her eyes looked pie-cut in glee like the early Mickey Mouse. "We made hot soup." She winked. "Cream of us."

She finished eating, shoved back her plate, and wiped her mouth with her napkin. "I had an abortion by him, I'll admit it." She drew up her shoulders to express indifference. "Bummerewski. But who cares?"

"You didn't," he said, thinking *John Adams was correct: power follows property*.

"I don't even remember. What I do recall though is seeing him one night in the midst of an unbelievable shit-fit throw a fucking drill-sander at a complaining customer. We used to go out together on lounge-core nights. 'Spin me some Spandex fodder!' I'd scream. I used to rouge my earlobes and go in big for major black eyeliner. But I've seen them all, ravers, meat mistresses, pantry sweethearts, models with their 'composites,' all the bitches, klub kids, guys with guayaberos, snakeheads, Butch Waxed hair, pier-queens, amphetamine elves, domino pirates, ass-jockeys, emos, and, like I say, auto-shop boys." Eyestones listened to her lurid tales, all of them melodramatic accounts meant to lower the lights behind her rising glory. "I once saw twenty-one-year-old Penelope Tuesdae, the cabaret minx at the 999999's—or was it at Flickbix? But wait, you hate performance artists, right? The chan*toose* Vanessa Trouble with her bobbed hair and slick finger-waves at Torch's was *grrreat*! Aaaannyway, ever hear of singer Donna Coney Island? Fantastic! I once saw her perform one of her shows, *From Here to Maternity*, while like swinging in wild circles one of those old boxy mikes? With a cord? Like the kind you probably grew up with? From, you know, way back when? " She waved her hand in front of his face sarcastically. "Hello? Are you there?"

Of course, thought Eyestones, she *would* have been open to anything. Her moods fashioned modes, he realized, who watching the spectrum of Laura's changeability thought of the Victorian way with butter, meringue, blancmange, and maple sugar and their penchant for pressing such malleable and protean foods into an assortment of shapes.

"Did you like your dinner?"

Laura looked blankly at him. "It was OK." She shrugged. "Kan's in San Francisco is better. Big Dumplings in Supreme Soup. Mmm-

mmm." She finished off her glass of wine. "I wish we could have gone to one of those . . . what did they call them, oh, that's right, automats. I saw them in photo-fumettis."

"Horn & Hardarts?" he said. "There used to be one right across the street from Grand Central. Raisin pie. Pork and beans. Dishes with blueberries and ice cream. Cups of coffee." He shook his head. "Gone the way of Ozymandias. The last one closed on Third Avenue years ago."

He wanted to tell her, just to fill her in, how in his impecunious early years in the city he used to buy day-old cooked foods at the old Horn & Hardart at 577 9th Avenue. Why would she care hearing about his days as a student when, taking violin lessons and living over on "Needy Ninth Avenue," his term for it, he survived on stale baked-goods from Dugan's at #571 and bought unclaimed laundry at #726 and purchased unclaimed shoes at the shoe-repair shop at #787? And what would be the point of it, he asked himself. It was neither her world, nor her time.

The problem he now faced was trying to overlook her lack of manners and the fact that she never said thank you for anything. He had had her report of New York City. So unatonably odious, no sympathy with her fellow humans, a brief interval in her life that was vitiated as much by her own self-doubt as by the petty privations she had faced, which pointed to a species of failure seen against the backdrop of success from which she saw she would ever be excluded. Eyestones had seen enough of her, he began to realize with some alarm. Didn't anything, including a person, become transparent if it was made thin enough? A sheet of iron a hundred-thousandth of a millimeter thick is every bit as transparent as glass. But although he saw through her, he wondered, would he ever act on it? He knew her, but would he respond? Why had he not learned by now that if common sense was the enemy of romance, it was no less the foe of indifference? The fact was he could not desert her. It came to him, wistfully, with some fright, as well, that in a real sense she had become his . . . his "friend," his "enemy." The two were part of the same identity. He pondered a Proustian sentiment that suggested that taking one's mind off a person can somehow put her in peril, that lassitude or indifference of a kind could even place the person at physical risk.

"I bet you never saw a genicon," said Eugene. They were sitting between the two lions, Patience and Fortitude—facts she'd not have

cared about, he thought—on the steps of the New York City Public Library, sharing a submarine sandwich on a grey afternoon. They were both footsore and exhausted, having walked around the city looking at books and buying records and visiting museums.

"Which is?"

"A sexual partner imagined by a woman who is no longer satisfied by her real partner."

She quickly looked at him for a trace of irony. Was he slyly alluding to her and Micepockets? "Doesn't every woman have one of those? What else is new?"

"No, I mean actually has an imaginary friend that she *believes* in! That's common?"

She grinned. "Give me the real partner."

Laura's flippancy grew from a mood of unconcern. That had been their second trip to New York City, when, unlike the first time, since they often were not getting along, they chose to spend a lot of time seeing the city separately. She did not really matter anymore to him, not at this period, for by now he had seen and fallen for Rapunzel, with no idea still of who she was. That morning at the flea market on 26th Street and Sixth, uncharacteristically having had to rise early to attend, Laura in the light jacket she wore had crankily complained that she was cold and wanted to leave.

"What about autoassassinatophiliacs? People who get sexual gratification by imagining their own murder," said Eugene. "Did you ever meet a thelerethist?"

"Which is?"

"A person who gets excited by touching—or even seeing—a person's nipples."

"Weird."

"Or saliromaniacs? Those who are sexually obsessed by someone's deformity."

There came a cold pause. She put down her slice of pizza. "Did it ever occur to you how deformed it is to know such things?" She looked away.

"Possibly," he said. He wiped his eyes. The sky was grey, bisected by one vague contrail. "I think it'd be better if I meet you back at the hotel later."

"Are you angry?"

"Are you saying what you mean?"

"Are you leaving?"

"Are you trying to belittle me?"

"Are you seeing someone else?"

"Are you suggesting it's your business?"

"What does that mean?"

He shrugged, stood up, walked a few feet, and, turning to speak, pointed behind her and replied, "You can read between the lions."

Laura's New York was the parvenu's New York, of course. She had her spiel. There is where Studio 54 used to be. That's the Olympic Tower, that's the Time, the hotel with rooms all painted in the primary colors. She had once seen the dress-designer Halston on the street. All that. But the irony was she was constantly getting lost in the city, taking the wrong train, even when showing Eugene one of the several places where she used to live. They watched boats ply the East River. They ate tiramisu down in Little Italy, bought scarves, joked about the Zeckendorf Towers—"Madonna's Tits"—and several times went down to the South Street Plaza to feed the cavorting seagulls dancing in from the Brooklyn skyline that brought back memories for him, which he also found pointless to share, of going down when he was a young boy to the waters by the Brooklyn Bridge to the "finger piers," run in the 1950s by thugs in ILA local 1814, and to the Red Hook and Sunset Park docks and old piers 54 to 62 where the Grace and U.S. Lines ships once docked. He also remembered in his late teens watching Italian and Japanese films at the Thalia and underground films at midnight at the Waverly and the Bleecker Street Cinema and sitting for hours reading novels in the Paris Bar down on Peck Slip in the fish market that was always deserted on Sunday afternoons. So many changes had come about long since. How different things were now. In shallow waters, he thought, the dragon becomes the joke of the shrimp.

One morning they were both sitting on the docks and looking off in the direction of the Statue of Liberty. Eugene asked, "Who now remembers that the Statue of Liberty was initially conceived by her French sculptor as an English peasant girl and was intended to adorn the Suez Canal?"

Laura said, "You joking?"

"This country is filled with surprises. Amerigo is Latin for Henry. America is the feminine, Latinized form of Amerigo." He tapped Laura on the top of her head. "Welcome to the United States of Henrietta!"

On every visit to New York City together, Laura Warholic and Eyestones would always somehow end up back in the dim record shops on boring St. Mark's Place in a muddle where, with an abstract air and seeming indifference, she would spend endless hours flipping through the record bins and looking for old LPs. As usual, she exercised her gift for making some kind of uncanny bonding with the dumbbells who worked at these shops, basically showing off in front of Eugene as she went to the front counter where, nipping a brownie, she would rock back and forth like a sugar-fiending cookie whore. "I notice you've got a lot of Hammond groove, vintage Europop, Gainsbourg, hip- and strip-hop," Laura would earnestly ask, "but I mean do you have any, like, um, industrial, new goth, darkwave, or electro stuff?" It was as if Laura were doing a personal survey of alternative music all on her own. They went from one shop to another with Laura approaching the shop-help to inquire, "Do you have any merengue? Or hard, dubby, funky, happening house mixes? Any new CDs by Ween? Autechre?" She would go up to ask especially hip sales guys to play obscure new wave '80s hits, guys who scornfully amused with her, although she was unaware of it, would begin nudging each other. *Who's the fucking bruggioli*? "Hey, is all of this too modern for you, Superman?" Laura would ask Eugene mockingly. "I guess so," he would reply. "You're out of it." "'Probably-obably-obably,' said the goose," admitted Eugene, leaving to eat some Good & Plentys and to wait outside for her.

In one record shop, he found little of what he liked in the way of historic or '20s jazz but did see some funky old albums from his days in Vietnam during the psychedelic '60s, almost all of them ratty old mono copies of various groups that his buddies played when high on pot—Laura of course would never have heard of them—like Spirit in Worm, Damien, Head Shop, Lincoln St. Exit, the Rising Storm, Electric Toilet, the American Blues Exchange, Lollipop Shoppe, and so forth. It was like a time warp. He suddenly smelled shadowy jungle, humid red land, the odor of charcoal and fire-smoke. A helicopter deafened him. He could even taste apple juice, which is what people guzzle who smoke pot all day and which he drank by the gallon in the jungle back in those dank, napalm-smelling, humectant, immanacled days that with every year were becoming a greater abstraction. In another one of those St. Mark's Place record shops, Rocks in Your Head, Eyestones, having asked several questions of a pretty blonde clerk, quickly invited a scornful glance from Laura who, with a loud whis-

per, challenged him with shallowness. He merely shrugged and said, "I happened to see her last name was Carlquist." "So?" asked Laura, indignantly. "It was Queen Noor's mother's maiden name. She's half-Swedish." "*Her* again?" snapped Laura. Eyestones walked out of the shop and waited across the street. But he often left stores before Laura did, who dawdled, who never rushed, who took her time, who, masticating fruity gum, seemed forever doomed to be perched over a record bin like a dog fucking a football. For Laura the act of hurrying somehow exploited a deficiency that she proudly refused to recognize, preferring instead to remain at the mercy of her moments, feeling with added amusement that if delays irked him they therefore pleased her.

She was always searching for (a) any recording in any form of a new hobbyhorse of hers, a rock group called the Craven Slucks that Eugene had never heard of, and (b) magazines of any stripe that included articles on that group or any of the guys in the band, and (c) the vinyl soundtrack to what he considered to be the vastly overrated movie *Taxi Driver*, less a profound drama, or so he felt, than a cheap psychological case study with its dissonant, overwrought, strung-out film score by Bernard Herrman, specifically what Laura badly wanted to hear, an extended, ominous percussion of snake-rattles and rippling scales and incoherent vibrations that was in her opinion intellectually profound and not at all the cheesy cinefaux interpolation of the rampaging thriller and bloody-axe-chop movie tradition to which he himself laughably consigned it.

For another delusion of Laura's that had emerged around this time was her exaggerated self-regard about movies—film, as she always referred to it—which piously generated in her an inexplicable intellectual hubris whenever she reverently took one in, prompting analyses later, monologues really, in which she sounded like the editor of *Cahiers de Cinema*! It was a Cambridge vice, of course. She had an appetite for and constantly spoke of overrated films like *Slacker* and *Bullitt* and *Performance*. She went to see Ingmar Bergman's *Face to Face* every chance she got, insisting it was about her, and frequently quoted lines from it like "And suddenly I was embarrassed by Daddy's hugs and kisses," and "The human brain. A crazy gadget without any counterpart in the rest of zoology," and "We're thankful for the horrors we're used to. The unknown ones are worse." It seemed so strange to Eyestones that for movies to be favorites they had to be about her. She seriously entertained the idea of becoming a movie critic, in spite of the fact that her favorite

movie of all time, a chronic fixation, was the psychological drama *The Night Porter*, starring Charlotte Rampling and Dirk Bogarde—she went to see it over and over again—in which a former concentration-camp inmate leaves her husband to rekindle a crazed, sadomasochistic affair with a former prison guard who ends up a slave. Guard and prisoner become interchangeable. It was a film Laura had more or less adopted, for campy and inversely snobbish reasons no doubt, as a personal statement and avant-garde cinematic manifesto. "I know, I know, I need to see a therapist," she would reply to any objections to it, always her sarcastic and preemptive way of putting an end to disapproval. Was Eyestones censorious or dismissive of her? Was it his weakness in being with her that created a self-revulsion in him that he turned against her? It was not so much that he found her less objectionable than curious as that he felt obliged to convince her that theirs was not a relationship but a friendship. He had mistakenly allowed himself to be close to her once before. No more. "There are two kinds of fools," declare the Japanese. "Those who have never climbed Mount Fuji, and those who have climbed it twice." Again, against a defiled standoff that maddeningly could be resolved only by a constant and unremitting struggle between them, they agreed to compete even as they fought to cooperate. Still, temperature increases with depth, and Eugene feared he was getting involved. Why did he put up with all this shock-and-awe? Was it because he was convinced that by way of his understanding he had a way to help her? She was weak, he understood that, and yet a weak or soft metal that is alloyed with another weak element, amazingly enough, may produce a strong alloy with strikingly different properties from those of the parent metals. Copper and aluminum are both fairly weak, but the addition of 5X aluminum produces an alloy twice as strong as copper! Buckets, bridges, buttons, boathooks, biscuit tins, bugles, and bells—throw in as well, he thought, the brides and grooms of fate!

What about his own weaknesses? Did he indiscriminately need her, as well? Was he cultivating in her his own "enemy-friend," temporizing with a sort of antecedent guile all on his own the better to see her matriculate through her problems, the better to know them, study them, who knew, even contrast them with his own, in the same way that to hear silence in a movie small contrasting noises are required to create suspense, a few little sounds to make it *sound* silent?

Was he himself using her, in short?

If so, was it any different in intent or purpose, and if so how, from

crouching along breathless in the shadows, stalking through the murkiness of Phong Dien at night on a "kilo tango" with an M-60 and some 500 rounds of link-belt 7.62 mm, in order to blow someone away in the leaf-stipple?

Eyestones truly wondered what the status of joined forces revealed, whether disparate or not. For example, could one person reaching out to help another lost soul hazard becoming lost himself? Drown like a fool in the very same waters? It was an enigma. If what one does beneficially for the least of God's brethren, he does for God, as we are promised we do, what effect—it is never mentioned in Scripture—does the least of God's brethren have on the *benefactor*? Never mind anything else, cannot even praise in a negative way inflate an ego, swell a bump of pride? A solitary person *is* a perpetual question. But so is a couple. A solitary person who cannot bear to be alone was only an added misery. The answer to it, coming not from the head but from the heart, was not beyond but above intellection. But it is true. It is never untrue. It is almost impossible to desert a person who has no friends.

XVIII
Mything You

One night Laura Warholic, with nothing to do as usual, came by to visit Eyestones without bothering to telephone first, although he had been trying to write. He dropped what he was doing and offered her what happened to be the kind of non-imported beer she hated—"Don't you have any Killian Red?" asked Laura, taking the can—but he told her he hadn't a clue what he had, as, preoccupied, he had been kicking around an idea for the November issue most of the day. "What is that?" she asked, frowning. "It's candy," said Eugene, knowing better because of her jealousy than to tell her more. "They're better than Good & Plentys. Try some." On Columbus Day, a holiday that she herself for good political reasons and as a sworn enemy of imperialism always *de*-celebrated, Harriet Trombone had earlier come by and left on his doorstep some homemade goober brittle, along with a note referring, not favorably, to the great navigator from Genoa: "Kill the Dago!" With an affection for Eugene that she of course always refused to declare, she often cooked island meals for him, like cassava pone, ribs in hot, sweet mahogany sauce, coo coo with okra and beaten biscuits, and grilled breadfruit in Bajan hot sauce with pigeon peas and callaloo and cornmeal dumplings. "No, I mean *that*," said Laura, correcting him. Eugene looked up. "Oh, you mean what's playing on the phonograph. 'My Reverie,'" he said. "Biggest hit of 1938. Larry Clinton and His Orchestra. Bea Wayne, vocalist."

Eugene got up, carefully stepping clear of his cat Nook who was asleep on an old 78 rpm Okeh record, and closed the front louver of the console to lower the volume. "You don't like it?" he asked. Standing there, Laura looked long as a corncrake, a spiky weed, and was wearing burgundy Crimplene slacks of 100 percent washable polyester that were too short and a Sanka-orange T-shirt reading *What Is Reality?* that was too tight. ("Great slogan, cooz," a New York street-cat had once shouted to her in the East Village where she bought it. "Looks good on a flat background!") In the narrow, ill-fitting clothes she wore she looked something like a fish frame. *Stenovestia*, it occurred to Eyestones, *the practice of wearing tight-fitting clothes. Was it simply a fashion trend or an actual paraphilia?* A pair of cheap black sepals swung from her bat-ears, in front of which the guiches of her hair looked like the fraying beards of sea mussels. The heavy lipstick she wore gave her the appearance of a sullen fashion tramp, one not ready to cooperate. Her somewhat long neck, which otherwise might have been attractive, when stretched in peevish disapproval only added to a plethora of figure faults and gave her the bony look of a slattern with a broom-thin bosom and bones like the shadows of leafless trees. An odd creature, it was weirdly as if upon seeing her one always had to get used to her all over again, that long nose, that thinness. It was inexplicably a shock each time he met her, no matter how little time passed. In all the years he knew and saw her regularly, that surprise, the need for readjustment, never quite went away.

It caused Eyestones to question from the fact of foveated vision whether we indeed read an image physically as well as mentally or psychologically. What saccadic patterns did one bring to seeing? What haptic bias? What nodes in the viewee bewildered us? Did we stumble on or over our own glimpses by what before we did not want to see?

"You'd rather hear something else?"

"Whatever," she replied, one raised eyebrow. She clasped her hands behind her and stood there looking at him as if she were trying to guess his weight. She could be staggeringly matter-of-fact, an indifference not so much bordering on rudeness as calling into question her IQ.

Seeing she disapproved, he carefully took off the record and put it in its proper sleeve.

"I don't have the password, right?" asked Eugene, picking up Nook, who prior to his nap had been waiting all day by the bathtub faucet for

the fulfillment of one of his fascinations eagerly hoping it would drip.

Shrugging, almost bored, Laura simply held up three tight fingers, like a Girl Scout, *W*, then held them sideways, *E*, mouthing—and miming—"*whatever*." She changed faces so quickly it was as if once you saw two sides of her, you saw four, or if there were four then eight, and after awhile, regarding any kind of clarity, decisions became impossible. It became almost a game for him, one that was informative, not enjoyable, to observe at what point of friction she would refuse any sense of cooperation with him and resort to some formula in the very same way, he imagined, she would leave someone she was with simply for seeing another man she wanted to be with.

"By the way," said Eugene, standing up and handing her a sheet of paper. "Here. I printed a copy for you of Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken.' Look at that poem again. The road less traveled, notice, is no better than the road he did *not* take and the person who took it no better than the one who took the other road! People never get that straight. To me it is only a liar, or a prevaricator, who in his revisionism will try to claim in later life that the road he—or she—took made all the difference. It didn't!"

She finished her beer. "Want a bump?" she asked, taking off her Walkman earphones from around her neck.

"What?"

"Need a slam?" asked Laura, walking over baker-legged to throw a small bag of pot on the table. "I want to get mellow, Pumpkin Pie." She disappeared into the bathroom, singing something unintelligible. With some curiosity, Eugene flicked open her Walkman and picked up the cassette, which read: "Eat My Dust You Insensitive Fuck" by Catherine Wheel. "Want to catch a midnight flick?" Laura called out from the other room. "To see what? Please, no teen comedies or any movies involving snow, men wearing funny hats, kind uncles with children, or anything with the totally humorless Marx Brothers, surely the biggest frauds of all time." She re-entered the room, flopped down backwards on his bed, and beckoned him.

"Wait, may I play you just a couple of great old blues records? They're right here. I was listening to some of them earlier." She twitched like a rabbit avoiding an iris. "Do you have any Mudhoney?" asked Laura. "I wanted to sleep with Mark Arm, their lead singer." "Please?" he said, carefully picking out a selection. He wound the machine and dropped on Robert Johnson's "Ramblin' Blues" and then

played "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom" and then bowing, he said, "Miss Bessie Smith of Chattanooga, Tennessee's version of 'St. Louis Blues,' for an encore, recorded on January 14, 1925, with Mr. Daniel Louis Armstrong on cornet, how do you do. Awesome. It's Duxbak's record, by the way. And here"—he put on another record—"is Louis doing 'West End Blues.' Listen to the intro. Twelve-bar blues. Notice the solo change every twelve bars." "Great trombone," said Laura, sitting through the play. "Fantastic, isn't it? That's Fred Robinson on trombone." Eyestones played more of Bessie—a few of her salacious songs—on old Columbia originals, "Down in the Dumps," "Kitchen Man," and "Take Me for a Buggy Ride." He put on "Gimme a Pigfoot" and said, "A young Benny Goodman is on the clarinet here, a rare chance to hear Bessie with swing accompaniment. Great bass, too. And," he enthused, "listen to hear one of the rare references in one of her songs to smoking marijuana. Oh, 'Down in the Dumps' was her swan song, recording-wise, by the way. 'Kitchen Man' was written by Andy Razaf, whose real name was, believe or not, Andreamenentania Paul Razafinkeriefo, nephew of Ranavalona III of Madagascar. I'm not making this stuff up."

"Now catch this," he said, after playing that pile of records. She stretched out and yawned. "More?" she inquired. "Wait, wait, wait. I only wanted you to listen to Ishman Bracy's 'Brown Mama Blues.' Came from Central Mississippi. That's Charlie McCoy on guitar. And do you hear that?" He waited. "Listen to that plunk. That's a mandolin!" He played more. "Nineteen-twenty. August 10th, to be exact. Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds. 'Crazy Blues,'" he announced, cranking the machine and lowering the arm on the record. "The very first vocal blues record. Sold over one hundred thousand during the month of its release. That's Willie 'The Lion' Smith on piano and Buster Bailey on cornet. Now listen to this." He put on an old Ma Rainey record accompanied by the Georgia Jazz Band. "It was this record, Laura, recorded on October 16, 1924—that's Charlie Green on trombone, Fletcher Henderson on piano—that started the initial craze for black music and so-called race records, which, oddly enough, were first distributed by black Pullman porters carting them up on trains coming north and playing them in the buffet-flats located in private houses where they usually found their lodgings. Sex. Sadness. Stormy relationships. Carl Van Vechten once said, 'Blues are the Negroes' prayer to a cruel Cupid.'"

"No movie then?" asked Laura, yawning.

"Wait," he said. He put on one more record. "This is Charlie Patton's 'Mean Black Cat Blues' where, although the melody follows the form of the blues, there is only one chord throughout. Sit down. Go ahead. Please. Pull up a chair. " Laura wrapped her arms to listen. "Do you like it?"

"Yes."

"Really? No, do you?"

"I do. But that's enough."

"Wouldn't you have liked to have been there to hang out at Tommy Johnson's house down in the Delta? Listening to Son House play 'Death Letter' or 'Walking Blues'? If time-traveling existed, I'd be there in a heartbeat."

"Would you go? Today?"

"Yesterday," he exclaimed.

"What about *Quink*?"

"It's not a job, it's a concept. I decided at one point in my life that I never wanted to be anything that would not allow me to be anything else I wanted to be. When I was a mere lad, I feared that. At ten, I went on a Sabbatical, which turned into a Mondical, a Tuesdical, a Wednesdical, and so forth. I ended up being nothing that I can currently identify, which I suppose means I got my wish."

Again Laura beckoned him over by her. Eugene sat down next to her. She curled up small into a pillbug, yawned twice, and asked him to read her something or tell her a story, as he often did. His head was filled with original tales, bold and full-color sagas about characters of his own invention and she knew them all: Dr. Sliceage; Mordor, Lord of Darkness; O-Face, the Flatulent Bulgarian; Wyo-Ming, the Chinese Cowboy; Duncan the Rim-Man; The Question-Mark Kid , a cowboy who wore that grammatical tattoo in the center of his face; Mr. Gnooce, the Cross-Eyed Cossack; the Smokers, a crazed family of Amish wing-nuts; Wally Nidiculous, the Iowa Patriot; Bugong, who lived for 40 years in the wood of a pencil box; Quercus, the Man with Hands like Maple Leaves; Grylloblatta, the Ice Giant; Ynot the Genius, Who Knew Every Answer To Every Question Ever Posed to Him; Expunge, the Mad Male Nurse who garroted old ladies; Clockwatch Woods, a copse of grey shapeless trees and bushes fatal to any who entered there; Resultan the Magician who killed by a stare. "I'll even listen to the one about Constance Quesnet—or is it Quonstance

Cesnet?" Laura asked, laughing and writing comic letters in the air with a finger. She had particular favorites: Bite-Wing, the Insect God; Father Motherway, the Perverted Priest; Mr. Mercurio, a bespectacled faint-hearted man who, allergic to iodine, was always being chased by the nasty neighborhood kids who were constantly trying to force him to take some; and of course the Paper People, who because they could cut and hurt people were loathed for their albinism and so were always in danger of being executed by crazy, outraged black men who were encouraged to chase them around with scissors.

"I also love the one about Corcovado the Droolie," she said. "Oh, and Hugh Freidy, the Psychotic Dentist, the Man Behind the Mouth. You won't tell me anything?" She took off his eyeglasses and kissed his eyes. "What about the one about Mr. Noyeski, the Bulgarian barber who was wicked mental and intentionally cut little boys' hair into different-shaped jugs?"

"It's so late," he said.

"I love your stories, Snoopy Snoot."

"I'm tired, Laura."

"Well, will you sing me that song?"

"You said *well*."

"No, I didn't."

"You did. You just said, "'Well, will you sing me that song?'"

Hadn't they agreed to stifle that verbal tic?

"Oh, sorry."

"Forgiven,"

"Will you please sing me that song?"

"Which one?"

"You know, my favorite. The one you sang last summer driving through Festus, Missouri, or somewhere out there in the boondocks. 'There is no bicep in an umbrella,' she crooned, 'No form has ever been duller,' and I was full of joy de dum de dum, so I raised my hat or my cock," she punched him and laughed, "Dee dum, dee dum. Come on, *you* know it."

"You're all hopped up."

"All right, what about telling the story of Bombadière, the Red-Footed Rapist?" she asked with a bright laugh, becoming exuberant, which was rare for her. "Or, or, or Dr. Remulak who has a fork for one ear and a spoon for the other? Or Kap Khong Krap, the Thai monk who hates straight lines?"

"It's not hate. Get in the car, folks. He simply sees straight lines as subversive."

"Whatever, go ahead."

"Another time?"

"OK tell me again about Professor Munch Who Ate His Wife and Divorced His Lunch! Or Nightskin the Serial Killer! Or the Freak Sisters! Or Ace Backwards, Who Did Everything in Reverse! What about Nothingface the Monster? Or Cabotage the Quilt Swiveler? Or the Green Chimney Killer? Or Gidgiddoni, the Mormon Scourge, Who Sent Out Armies in the Night? Or Trivio, the Chameleon Spy? Or Fatwhacker, Who Had a Head Shaped Like a Drill-bit?" She paused. "How about Muculipidosis the Mad Ferret? Joe Cavatelli the Thumbfumbler? Larry Dambasher Who Had the Biggest Ears on the Planet? On Too Long, the Taiwanese Comedian? Alice Sockets, She of the Missing Eyes?" She looked up. But Eyestones was not in one of his Edmund Dulac moods. As Laura rested her head on his thigh, sadly for her, he could think only of secret Rapunzel and wind-wafted scents of clover field, new-mown hay, the soft-honey scent of sun-baked heather, and of a buttercup meadow in April. There was again that faint acrid odor to Laura, he noticed, best put somewhere between the smell of wet burlap and musky cocoa-bean. He was tired, but she prodded him. "I don't feel inspired, Laura, OK? Why don't I read something to you?" he suggested, getting up and walking to a bookshelf. He was tired, he speculated, because he felt guilty. A vibrant image of someone else glistened before him, blossoming in daffodil-bright light, and, feeling an ache in his wistful heart as painful as the hurt against his guest, he recollected the poetic words of Henry King and silently apostrophised Rapunzel:

> Thou art the book,
> The library, whereon I look
> Though almost blind.

Standing before a wall of books, he selected from a shelf Bertolt Brecht's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and read part of it to her. Laura, who was always slow to react, said nothing at first, then she rose on one elbow and said angrily, "When you have money, you can do anything you want, see? But if you don't have money, you're a criminal." Eugene more or less agreed. His fatigue agreed. She added

with a honk, "Like that poor little bitch Harriet Trombone, rattling around downstairs—"

"Oh please."

"—who is so bitter."

"Leave her alone."

From the start, Laura was jealous toward anyone to whom Eugene paid attention, whether she was around or not. He was astonished that she refused to see that it was she herself who was always ogling men. Was it stupidity she never did? Lack of self-awareness? Stubbornness?

"She cooks for you, right? Doesn't she want to sleep with you, as well?"

"Don't be absurd," said Eugene. He walked over to a niche. "Did I ever introduce you to Buddha? I found it in Chiang Mai. The bump on top of his head, the *ushnisha*, means that he was super bright. If you put a light under the Buddha's chin," he said, striking a match, "a shadow lifts, and—look, look!—he smiles. Some Buddhists have even claimed that the feces of Lord Buddha glowed in the dark." He held out the matches to her. "Try it. Go ahead, Laura. Strike one." But she would not. Light shapes shadows but *gravity bends light*, he thought, dejectedly. She's a downer. Enisled in the world. Can't afford to look different than the concept she has of herself. Don't we escort ourselves through life infatuated with the ghosts of what we are not in spite of the fact they haunt us?

Overtaken suddenly by a tantalizing sensation on the periphery of understanding that there was still so much unknown to her, he enthusiastically pulled a grudging Laura off the bed to show her what once, visiting a temple, Rinpoche Thich Quang Duc Thupten had shown him. "Look," he said, "sit in a lotus position. Here," he took her arms, "steeple your pressed hands on top of your head."

"Do I have to?"

"Now in front of your face. Then in front of your throat, your chest, now touch them to the ground, with your hand resting on them. Now sit up."

She stood up, muttering, "This is ridiculous. I should get going."

Why is she here? he asked himself. Why are we two together in a room? Could it be that I would rather dislike her than myself? Do I see some of me in her, feel that, if I should come to understand her, I might better understand myself? Why? To change the way I am and what I do and how I think? Or is it I am attempting to blame myself

for not being her as a way of feeling humility by guilt? To feel by keeping an anti-paradigm in front of me that love is unattainable? Or have I a kind of struggling need by some kind of messiah-complex simply to acquire and then impart information to someone radically in need of it? By being with her to keep impermanence in mind, while seeing that the very nature of things is to disintegrate, and in consequence to have no attachments? Or was it that I wanted someone to take care of? Didn't I always believe that the best way to cope with danger is to keep in contact with it?

Eyestones put the teapot on and set out two cups. He looked at his watch. It was late. Then he looked up. He suddenly noticed for the first time her flash earrings. It even surprised himself, whose myopia generally led to such lapses. At first he hesitated to inquire but then asked, "Where have you been?"

XIX
Scene Unseen

Laura heard his question.

"Out," she responded coyly, a Punch-like smile, her long nose almost reaching into her mouth, pulling out of her reluctant face. "I don't want tea."

She rose, turning to look at him. Her flat voice was non-committal. Something seemed to presage a change between them.

"What, has someone called to gossip about me?" She took a long pull from her beer and wiped her mouth on her sleeve. "That fag Chasuble, who goes out slumming himself? There is no coldness on the face of the earth, let me repeat, none, like getting on a queer's shit-list! Believe me. It lasts years. I've seen it in San Francisco. They're the worst bitches on earth and will snub you for half a fucking century for not sending a thank-you note or failing to put a coaster under a drink. What fucking doilies!" Laura had said it before, that she superstitiously never divulged to gays anything that she wanted kept private of a personal matter, in the same way early Arabs never used nails in their ships because they feared great magnets at the bottom of the sea dragged the iron out of them. "Was it Mutrux? Or Little Bob Merkle, the gossip? I sold him a sofa. So?" She huffed, angrily. "I am so sick of those people. Discknickers, if it was him, is a liar. Him with his big fucking watch! Suits made out of llama whiskers! Remember that day in the Quincy Market he saw us together and started whistling

the Dead Milkmen's 'Takin' Retards to the Zoo' and like makes this gesture? With, you know, double meaning? I saw that. I'm like *excuse me, asshole*?"

Whatever name she chose to offer was not the one she wanted to protect, or going to divulge.

"What's to hide?"

She ignored through arrogance what she could not destroy by polemic, answering his few questions with such rapid half-swallowed utterances that he could barely understand any part of her she ever stopped to verify.

"It's all right," said Eugene, setting down a small plate of the homemade brittle. "As Jennifer Jones says in *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, 'Every woman in love should have a secret garden.'"

"And as the Dead Milkmen say," Laura countered, "It's a fucked-up world."

Looking into her overfocussing face and brown, close-knit eyes, mismatched to a degree and impervious less to truth than to sense, Eyestones began pondering a new idea. As we all developed from feral stages, he wondered, did those of us who eventually became cold predators develop eyes that actually grew closer together? It was a physiological curiosity he had often noticed of the snouting type. The narrow stoat's head. The lovat eyes. The collarbone-length hair, either cane-colored or dyed maroon and rarely washed, and, when washed, a puff of dandelion. But what was he thinking in relation to what people looked like of what he should feel? Love and art, he thought, embrace not what is beautiful but what by that embrace becomes beautiful. Yet that was his problem with Laura. If it was not love that he felt in any embrace but rather art, what of beauty had he found?

"As far as I'm concerned, you can have been anywhere you want. Eat something," he said, pushing the plate toward her. "You don't have to look furtive."

"I don't look furtive."

"Why do you look down?"

"I don't look down," Laura bristled. "Why do you keep saying I look down? I do *not* look down."

"You carry your face down."

She exhaled angrily.

"Why are you so touchy?" he laughed. "You remind me of what the psychiatrist told his patient when she told him she kept repeatedly

dreaming of a teepee and a wigwam."

"What did he say?"

"You're too tense."

"I went to a *club*, OK? I had nothing else to do," she offered defensively and popped a candy. She fell back onto the bed. There was subterfuge in her askance eyes, and a silence held. She shook her head and wiped her face with arms that looked like the forelegs of a mantis. She looked over to him, inquiring, "*What?* What is your problem? I needed to hear some cool music. I vibe off it." Pausing for a moment, Laura Warholic stopped and almost started to laugh, hearing her own self-parody, which only amused her more.

"Like Catherine Wheel," he laughed.

She snapped her fingers. "'Eat My Dust'! Ambient-drenched space rock! Gotta get your ticket, baby!"

Coyness did not go with her jutting ears.

"I like bratty metal," she replied with that sideways smile of hers, "all right? Stuff that hits on all cylinders. Big strummy guitars, you know? Spin-dance jimmy jams. Even a nice timbale solo. Fuzz and fangs! Percolating chicken-fried heavy funk workouts!" She considered him and almost condescendingly—almost pityingly—looked into his thick reflecting glasses. "Ever hear of speed garage? Do you, um, happen to know the songs 'Dicknail' or 'Burn Black'?" She snapped her fingers and began to sing with that reedy, thin voice of hers that sounded like a small airhorn with a hole in it.

> "Slutkiss girl, won't you promise her smack?
> Is she pretty on the inside, is she pretty from the back?"

Eugene held up the teapot, which she waved away, and so he poured himself a cup.

She blew him off with a chin cock. "Don't act so bummed."

He laughed and sipped his tea.

"Or mocking."

"I'm not."

But there is matter in manner. And who was it said, give me a tooth and I'll reconstruct the animal?

"So, in these clubs with the, how did you put it, percolating chicken-fried workouts, did you . . . make a musicianly connection or is it not my business?"

"*Musicianly*?"

"It's an actual word, don't worry," he said. "I don't know about much else. Only words. I meant only, have you, you know, met someone?" *Trial and error*, he thought, *the lowest form of learning.*

She stared directly at him, then broke into the graduated transport of snide laughter. "Someone?"

"Anyone."

"Like?" Her voice jumped a tone. She narrowed her eyes, giving him that *choke on it* smile.

"A rock singer."

She seemed at first on the verge of recognizing an old acquaintance, then her eyes perceptibly shifted, as if in fear or apprehension of seeing a danger.

"Get back, Lo-retta!" she squealed and fell back onto the bed, laughing with mock horror. Then she got up and started walking around in a circle, as if to simulate amazement, but he could always detect the dissembling note. Deceit in its attempt to work has a kind of face. It is not a mask but a real face grimacing. Our greatest pretenses are built up, not to cover our lies, but to hide our emptiness, and the most difficult thing to hide is something not there. Hers was a horrid laugh precisely because it was a lying laugh, he was sure of it. It had a false upbeat tone of desperation. When she grinned, which turned her mouth into a wide red rectangle revealing almost all her upper gums, it had the parallel effect of a wizening alteration on her small face, which at the same time sadly gave one a glimpse like a dungeon of her entire mouth.

"You're joking."

"Please don't stand behind me."

"You're *so* not serious, right?"

> "'Who or why or which or what
> Is the Akond of Swat
> Is he tall or short, or dark or fair?
> Does he sit on a stool
> Or a sofa or chair or squat?'"

quoted Eyestones, playfully.

"Drop it," said Laura.

"All right," he said.

She simply denied everything, hewing this way and yawing that. "I sat alone. I always sit by myself. Get a grip, will you? I liked the band. What, you can't live with that?" She waited to explain. "Anyway, I was gonna tell you"—he had known her too long not to foresee this—"this one guy afterwards? Some nimrod like with long hair? A zipperhead banged up with speed, no doubt? Probably drives an El Camino, a car with a truckboard? Like stops and comes on to me. And I'm thinking no way, *not even*. I'm thinking I'd rather suck on a trailer hitch, OK? Besides I had a wicked headache."

It was a honey of a story that she recounted, how she spent the evening, a sort of circumstantial history of the utterly impossible, summed up like a high-school book report that to teacher's dismay merely summarized the plot. Jiveville! Froth City! He thought of juvenile behavior, especially from what she had recounted to him of her high-school past, carousing and drinking and getting into trouble. It was true, much truth is spoken that none may be revealed. It grew in worth as she tried to devalue it. Part of the value of a news report, Eugene suddenly realized, is to give listeners the comfort that they are exempted from any tragedies reported. Staged auditors listen to staged reporters in the way that games have rules. He noticed that Laura's concept of charity, beyond anything else, always involved the act of saving herself. He had long been used to her rolling disclosures, *eventually* telling the truth, when it was either convenient or unavoidable but, more than anything, could no longer hurt her. Why as if by some kind of multiplying consent did she need him to believe that she cared for him when she did not? Her deportment when she was with him, even at the best of times, always had an unsavory but masked self-convenience to it, convincing him of the unreality of any loyalty to him on her part. It was virtually a truism. An extremely generous person has always been a thief in another incarnation.

> Does he wear a turban, a fez or hat?
> Does he sleep on a mattress,
> A bed, or a mat? Or a cat?

Eyestones could easily see she would not allow her pleasure to leak into excitement. But memory is muscular. If you do the same movement enough times, it is in the muscle. As she had no convictions, she followed her interests and as to what those were no one was in doubt.

He placed his fingers wearily over his eyes and sighed. Had she been with Discknickers? Doubtful. He hated clubs, for one thing—"No," he once quipped when someone said he had seen him with her at a club, "Laura has a body like a two-iron"—and once he had possessed a woman, which he often did and with Casanova-like frequency, he rarely looked at her again. Still, he was completely lecherous and lived only a few streets from where she lived in a carnal little rutbox on Valentine Street. Would it have been Micepockets, or was she lying when she told him that he mostly kept downstairs, beating his wife? Or Mutrux? What about Jamm the Wesort, that black bongo-player from the Tooth Coast with a mesh T-shirt and do-rag tied to his head whom she had mentioned several times but with whom she claimed she never had a relationship? Who else was there?

"No 'flame' this time?" asked Eugene, walking over to the window. He smiled and lit another match under the Buddha's chin and it smiled. He blew it out.

Her face was expressionless as a Cranshaw melon.

"No light, either."

But there probably was heat, he thought. Laura, who tended to give off a smell like a polecat when she was excited, came over to him, guileful as Kundry, wetware for use, asteam. She was dewy and unctuous and flattering, and you could have shot snipe off her back.

"I want you, Clark Gable."

Guys like Warholic or Discknickers or Mutrux for all he knew were *created* by people like Laura, who simply duped themselves by blaming such men for being callow and cold. In point of fact, males are a vast breeding experiment run by females. We accuse others of our own sins, which is the blackness of sin. Eyestones believed it and wanted to do a piece on it one day. By selecting certain types of men, women *perpetuated* certain generic varieties of the sex, like cultivating a certain special or rare species of flower. Women clearly approve of machismo. A women's group once confronted Irven DeVore, a Harvard anthropologist, and asked him when, if ever, *ever*, men in general would give up male chauvinism, and he replied, "When women like you stop selecting high-success, strutting men like me!"

What about the Irving Fazolas of this world or the whispering John Smiths, wondered Eyestones, who cared about them? He replaced on a low shelf his old copies of "Cabin of My Dreams" (Brunswick 7930), "Song of the Islands" (Brunswick 7764), and "Sweet Stranger" (Bruns-

wick 8041). He loved Fazola. Born Irving Prestopnick on December 10, 1912, the Faz, who at the age of fifteen in 1927 was good enough to play with Candy Candido's Little Collegian, was a 300-pound clarinetist. And Smith, the "Whispering Baritone"—our very first crooner, in fact—while serving with the American Expeditionary Forces in France in 1918 was gassed in the battle of Saint-Mihiel and his voice was permanently injured. Eugene blew dust from his "Afraid of You" (HMVB-2718) and "Glad Rag Doll" (Victor 21882), and smiled as he recalled how Smith was known to always have rested his left hand on the piano and only played with his right hand.

Was Laura with her disadvantages to be listed among such isolatos? Did she feel their blues? Or had she merely turned blues to apathy and indolence? Was she truly in or suffering from what W. C. Fields, when begging off something, inventively called "noxis on the conoxsis"? Eugene Eyestones knew only that being alone for Laura Warholic was pure death. He thought of her, thin as an eel-spear, walking around up there in that hole she lived in, the hopelessness of the life she was squandering, and how Saint John of the Cross once said, "One receives from God as much as one hopes for." But had she hope or was her hope nonexistent? Curiously, activity was actually an aspect of her inertia, for she constantly fled herself and the meaning of what she was. She *yearned* to belong. Eyestones, however, loathed community. It was a major difference between them. One of Eyestones's new neighbors upon moving in once asked him, "Tell me, do you happen to know a nice breakfast place around here, some pleasant nook where, say, when I stop in every morning, they would smile at me and ask, 'Hi, Alan, the usual?'" Eyestones could only in truth reply, "You honestly couldn't have found in the entire world a poorer candidate to ask that of."

Although Laura badly wanted, needed, to belong, she simultaneously epitomized and, more dangerously, contravened what any successful young woman needed in order to do so. On the one hand, she was flirtatious, willing, and game. But she was also awkward, shy in an immature, gawky, working-class way, and not only deeply resentful, but lucklessly lacking in the womanly virtues of grace, beauty, and the ability to extend anything like a nurturing hand. In order to belong, she constantly moved, there was motion, but with every move she became a stranger and so only found herself at another remove. She was never in the same place or ever even seemed to show the same inter-

est twice. Where *was* she? She resembled those Zionists who insisted there is no such place as Palestine and then turned around to claim that every place is Palestine! She yearned to be bigger than she was, to belong, to be connected, with the same kind of pathetic and usurping pretension self-absorbed disc jockeys show who always announce from local six-watt radio studios, "This hour Mr. Frank Sinatra will stop by and after him we will have a special visit from Billie Holiday." If, for instance, she could ever be with somebody the crowd adored, she could feel better about herself and feel fully accepted. It would make up for the lack of acceptance she had experienced at home with her father going one way and her mother going another. She was not a papparazza but in fact a mad celebrazza, desperately chasing celebrity rockers. Wasn't insecurity at the root of all vanity, the way weakness spawns narcissism? An infatuation junkie, she never tried to hide the fact that she believed most young women fatuously wanted to be with a rock singer or the foolishness of the fantasy of expressing that wish, whenever she made it, the better to get away with what she saw as the arrested juvenility of a teenager in heat. She was immature, there was no question. Perhaps nobody is a complete grownup, thought Eyestones, until both of his or her parents are dead. So was the deduction therefore to be made that the kindest thing parents can do for their children is to die reasonably young?

What did Laura want? And why was she always coming to visit me? wondered Eyestones. Was it because I remain for her, by dint of being an unloved being myself, someone who could see more clearly by being effaced? In many people, particularly like her, the thought, the fear of separation is all that unites. Where is memory bred, in the heart or in the head? Do we cling to memories by way of a framework of recognition in the present of what we need to compare them to? Perhaps more to the point, what did he himself want? Was it a case of Mae West's "When choosing between two evils, I always like to take the one I've tried before?" Or was he a supernumerary in a larger picture like the tiny people in a Poussin landscape?

"No light? That means darkness." A long pause followed. "Why? Are you so surprised that I find you attractive?"

"I'm surprised at finding myself wanting to believe you," replied Eugene, "which I don't."

"That's your problem, Pudding Pie."

I don't think so, he thought.

A lie has a body. There is also manner in matter. Eugene was tired and decided to say no more about it. You cannot trust a generalization until it is proved. But one generalization in his life, proven by intent, so valid, was that she was no longer part of it. Q.E.D.

He poured her a cup of tea.

"I'd rather do the blunt," she said, waving the cup away. "What are you writing?"

"I haven't written a thing. Just bat-splat. It's too late anyway now, isn't it?" He was completely spent now and his eyes hurt, suffering as they often did later at night with ghost images, nighttime halos, headachy phosphenes, concentric rings, floaters, and reflections. He looked over at his sleeping cat. "It's a subject that can wait."

She puffed. "On?"

"Sorry?"

"What's the subject on?"

"Nothing."

"Don't tell me it's another piece as wacked-out as that thing there, that gonzo essay you did on women being untalented?"

"I never said women were not talented. That wasn't my point," he said. "Not even close."

"Close, according to Discknickers," said Laura.

"You *see* Discknickers?"

Sadly, he could hear him mimicking her malversation and jeering at her inappropriate laughter and see him duplicating her camel walk for the amusement of the people of the office in profane repetition.

She shook her head, bitterly. "Sorry. Not in this lifetime. Or the next." *Odd,* thought Eyestones, *then how could you have stolen his watch?* What did all her shape-shifting bode? "Besides, he is seeing some whore, anyway—a waitress at Totaljew's, I heard. Some scrubber who charges by the hour and doesn't give change." She then folded her arms, surveyor-style. "Well, what's it on?

"What?"

"Your article."

"Nakedness," he said.

"That's new?"

"'The flesh is bruckle, the Feynd is slee,'" quoted Eugene with amusement.

"Come again, Honey Pot?"

"I'm sorry, don't mind me," he said. "I'm only being a pain. It's a

line from *'Timor Mortis Conturbat Me.'* By the poet William Dunbar."

Laura made a face in response as if he was as daft as a drifting feather and impatiently waved him away.

"Lucilius—a Roman poet—thought that seeing others naked was the origin of vice," said Eugene, placing his cup of tea on the floor and picking up a handful of index cards and assorted sheets of paper. "Nudity was always considered by the Romans as strictly sexual," he read from a card. "The 'exiled soul' (*postliminio redeuntem suscipit alto*), as Prudentius says in the *Hamartigenia* (852-55), is 'lodged in the flesh' (*multos post divorsia carnis*). *Nudus*—Latin for naked—meant 'rough, uncouth,' as in Pliny Junior (*Epistolae* 4.14,4)." He looked up at Laura and asked, "Are we not to understand that Lot's wife, turning into a pillar of salt for lewdly cleaving to Sodom, recapitulates—and permanently—the pagan nakedness and exuded salty sweat of the act wherein she sinned? You know what I mean? Do you know about Lot, don't you?"

"Who?" Laura always smirked when she realized she had exposed her ignorance.

"It doesn't matter. I was only going to say that although the Greeks found nakedness beautiful in and of itself, it was not the case with the Romans." He took another card. "'The coarse sensual character of the [Roman] nation made it impossible for them to see a naked body as anything but a sexual stimulus,' notes Otto Kiefer in *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome*. Now this is interesting," he said taking off his eyeglasses, rubbing them on his shirttail and putting them back on. He flashed another card. "Propertius (11,15,13) and Plautus (*Mostellaria*, 289) both show that the naked body of the beloved was admired on purely erotic grounds but never as a work of art. Kiefer explains that the Romans, who abhorred gymnastics—by the way, did you know that? Don't be fooled by the movies! Even if they enjoyed watching gladiatorial fights, they never took part in them." Laura yawned. "Do you still want to hear this?"

Laura said nothing.

"Do you still want to hear this?"

"Whatever."

He sighed. "I'll come to the point. Kiefer explains that the Romans, who abhorred gymnastics, commonly took nakedness to be synonymous with indecency, impropriety, and vulgarity, in spite of the fact they collected naked sculpture—which, let me add, was another thing

entirely. No, it was customary in ancient Rome to remove all hair—"

She impatiently looked at her watch, which she always did with an accompanying forefinger.

"—from one's body, which was considered ugly. Nakedness hinted at private lust for the Romans, who sinned as much as any nation. Amazing, isn't it, that there isn't a single female statue from classical times that shows a sign of pubic hair or hair in the armpits?"

"Wowski," said Laura, sarcastically, and, claiming she had to go, stood up, rattled Nook's neck-fur, barely bussed Eyestones, and banging down the stairs with her noisy heels went flinging out the front door, which slammed. Eugene sat in the dark for a while and thought of Rapunzel.

After an hour or so, he walked outside. It was the kind of bright moonlit night that magically, preternaturally, lifted civilization right out of the landscape, transforming it with the kind of lunar light that was as eerily green as it was dark. Walking along the Charles River, Eugene breathed deeply, sighed, and looked up into the spectral heavens, craning his neck in order to survey the immense, eternal, blue-black canton of a sky that waved like a vast, black, infinite flag far above the winds and wetness and witching world. He stopped. The stars we see are all suns, he thought, looking up, overawed, their high shimmering silver-scintillance and ghostly enchanting light traveling about 6,000,000,000,000 miles in a year. Our galaxy is 100,000 light years in width, he knew, and there are millions of galaxies out beyond the Milky Way, and all the many galaxies put together may be part of only another larger system! How incomprehensible. The night was majestic, loud with darkness, like one of the thousand nights in the multiverse of his many dreams of her, in which, in his mind, Rapunzel's face was barely visible above the flicker of purple candlelight and her slanted almond-eyes took the shape of two glittering, elongated gems!

His heart heaved. He felt a tremor, a spacequake in space-time itself, the dizzying spins of neutron stars and their black holes with their odd gravity-wave signatures and remnant rumbles borne from the first neuroseconds of creation. He wanted to walk on a single gleam straight into the strange, lengthening incandescence. Amid the constellations in the southwest sky, he picked out in the nebula Orion the Hunter, wearing Betelguese for an epaulet and blue-and-white for a shoe-buckle, and particularly the belt of silvery stars, where that su-

perincandescent one star in the middle, the lovely scintillating one, now a sparkling nitred blue, now a twinkling white, the positive jewel, glittered like a diamond. Shenandoah, daughter of stars! Such a magnificent constellation, he thought. He closed his eyes to wish upon it, took a deep breath, exhaled, and thinking *A to B is B to A* whispered below hearing to absent Rapunzel the words of Tristan to Isolde: "Not I without you, nor you without me." He had by now walked quite far, in a wide circle, he saw, and finding himself out by the bridge and feeling hungry, although it was very late, decided to go to Monsky's for the famous $2.22 breakfast special: two eggs, two coffees, two toasts.

A jukebox was playing country trash. Behind the counter of the diner, Creedmore, with her black-cherry hair, red lips, and tight, low-cut waitress's uniform revealing a case of bouncy over-endowment, held up her hand and tinkled her fingers with a welcoming wave. Eyestones stepped into the men's room to wash his hands, pausing as he thought he saw in the tile-loops Laura kissing a frog with a mixture of buoyancy and sheepishness. Where were the two of them headed? What kind of acerbities in his soul never mind allowed for but abetted, even accentuated this strange relationship? he wondered. He wanted—yearned—to see Rapunzel's name.

When Creedmore took his order, smiled, winked at him, and asked with that South Carolina accent of hers, "How'dy' all want your coffee, honey?" Eugene responded, "Black, please. Have you a phone book?" "I sure don't," she answered with a smile and that inexplicable positive-negative of her region. Was Discknickers involved with her, wondered Eyestones, or should he chalk it up as another example of Laura's ongoing vindictiveness, never mind imaginative versatility? It was only minutes before the waitress slipped his plate onto the counter, this time with her telephone number written on a paper lovingly squeezed into one of the fork-tines, as she had done for him several times before. Eyestones was the only customer in the place. He took his plate, cup, and utensils and went to sit in a booth. Creedmore calmly sashayed to the end of the counter, rubbing her arms as she leaned forward ambiguously to ask of him, as she did, he gathered, of many a male customer, "Hayev yever been down South?"

Before he could answer, a man suddenly slipped into Eyestones's booth. It was Mutrux coming home from a football game. His blue jacket, creased like a road map, gave him a disheveled look, and his shoes were scuffed and unpolished. A loud, biting yawn snapped nose

to chin, sharpening his face that resembled a steakhouse waiter's. "It's late. *Klokken er mange*, as they say in Denmark. The clock is many! But you're still walking the ramparts, Horatio? And of all places, in Totaljew's—it's been ages since I've come here." He rubbed his belly. "Everything tastes better after midnight, don't you agree?" He grabbed a menu and hastily looked it over. "Two eggs. Two coffees. Double shakes. Pot roast for two," he read. "What is this place, a restaurant or an ark?" To Mutrux, Eyestones always seemed quiet and preoccupied but seemed moreso now than ever, especially quiet.

> "Querida, you have night in your eyes,
> Dark light, like the tropical skies."

crooned Mutrux, sarcastically, tapping the jacket sleeve of his friend, who asked, "Why the serenade?" Mutrux said, "Your eyes are the eyes of a fellow in love." He nodded knowingly in the direction of sexy Creedmore. Closing his eyes, Eyestones shook his head: *no*. "And it's definitely not—"

They knew each other, to a degree. And they both knew Laura very well.

"Definitely not."

Mutrux helped himself to a piece of Eyestones's toast, snapped at it in one bite like a ferret, and moving closer—he paused a moment to look around as if to be sure they were alone—leaned closely to ask, "But when she does come around, you still see her, don't you?"

"Not really 'see' her," said Eugene Eyestones sadly, guiltily. He took a sip of coffee and, lowering his head, leaned on his elbows. "Watch her."

"Watch her?"

"Just watch, yes."

"With *your* eyesight?"

"It's not what you see that matters," said Eugene, "it's what you don't."

XX

Mutrux's Confession; or, He Who Gets Slapped

"When I knew Laura back in San Francisco I never trusted her for a minute," said Mutrux, lighting up a cigarette and blowing out several plumes of smoke with no small sense of triumph. "I mean in the sense of being loyal. I never liked her. It was she who contoured *me*. She chased me, hounded me, stalked me, hassled me, wrote me, called me incessantly, appeared at my door at all hours, and I became involved, but, let me tell you, it was because right from the start I pitied her. And, let's face it, the stick was a cheap and easy lay. Steady ginch, if you know what I mean. I was out of law school only a few years, and I wasn't that liquid to begin with. When she ended our relationship with a scabrous one-page letter after three-and-a-half years for some incompetent guitar-playing sex traveler who looked like Andy Gump, scruffy as fuck, I had already smelled it out like a punctilious vegan can taste cow in meat. At first she immediately denied having met the guy, just as all the time we were together she was constantly bullshitting me that she never looked at anyone else, all the while of course being ready to accuse me of the grossest infidelity if I so much as asked a waitress for an extra cup of coffee or thanked a nine-year-old Girl Scout knocking at my door for selling me a box of pecan sandies! But as Jimi Hendrix once said, who in your miserable world

are you trying to convince you're made of gold, you know? Because I had learned within days of knowing Laura never to believe a single word she said—I had seen she could stomp a mud hole in you and walk it dry—I decided this time to trap her. I want to tell you this story because you deserve it. *She* deserves it. I mean, discrimination never was her middle name and even now isn't she out screwing some shine, Calypso Charlie, that nig-nog, and some weird crippled mud-crutch of a landlord from Loserville who is trimming her bush in exchange for rent? Now I mentioned her meeting this guy back in San Francisco for a reason. It is a theory of mine that an ugly woman always knows what you want from her. Laura Warholic remained suspicious of me from the jump, cagey and alert to questions I tried, unsuccessfully, to make seem offhand about whatever guy she was either already sleeping with or at least planning to. It was amazing. You could see, actually *see*, Laura Warholic grow suspicious. You could see her lie, as well: her small eyes would shift—she needed a dope-slap!—and that thin, button-thread hair of hers would get knotted and turn greasy as pig tallow from guilt. It was as if each of her ears, already long, would sprout into a comic length like foxglove leaves. She had a big mouth and a long history of writing insanely crazy letters of envy and jealousy. I knew since it was only a matter of time before I'd have all the facts at hand and be able to nail the bitch, I decided to bide my time. I'm good at that. Simply keep mum. Let me tell you something, Eyestones. Keeping silent is not unlike being alone.

"I knew Laura and Warholic most of the five years that she lived in San Francisco, before she was married, during, and after. She was a total creep from the first, a bullshitter, and, as of course you know, he is to phony what Michelangelo is to ceiling painting, a cardboard man with no convictions, only conclusions, who in his scheming contrivances leaves a streak of vindictiveness wherever he goes like the shine of a snail. They lived in a shitbox on Baker Street, in the lower-income part in the Western Addition, near Pacific Heights. It was virtually a slum: drunks, Chicanos, spades of all shades. 'Whassup this! Whassup that!' Their flat was a rat-trap. Warholic, jobless and cheating the government on SSI, was a fat, self-anointed pretend-editor of some Mickey Mouse periodical, a forum through which he used to meet novelists and writers and poets, one of his hobbies. You must be aware that fat Uncle Israel at *Quink* had and probably still has dreams of being a writer in a compulsive and baffled way, which is naturally one

of the reasons he both envies and hates you so. His ex-wife had no friends—none, not one—only vague hangers-on, and random ones at that, misfits and disgruntled skanks and xenophobic no-hopers whom she would mention to me only in passing. One miserable roommate of hers, Fanny Mae Titcomb, who had an ass on her the size of a Christmas turkey, used to fight with Laura all the time and in exasperation moved out within a month. Another roommate, a nosey, unhappily married, middle-aged pump named Gayle Bagle, Laura befriended, having learned of some dark incident or other between her and Warholic, strictly to prevent her from getting the chance again to seduce him, about whom, although he was impotent, out of her own desperation she was still inexplicably possessive, like a crow with a piece of broken glass. Stories about her lunacies were kaleidoscopically refracted by tales her various acquaintances told, women she jealously challenged at literary parties after Warholic, ignoring her, refused to introduce her to them. You have to understand that dumb Laura both married him and divorced him out of desperation. I knew of several such people with whom she had been in touch, the kind of poseurs and poseuses who, making up three-quarters of the city of San Francisco, spend their lives scheming to get by. They used to fight all the time. He would shove her about like a supermarket shopping cart and call her names, I remember, like Roadkill and Pencils and, oh yes, The Electric Ant. Everybody knew that Laura was unfaithful to Warholic. I knew she was unfaithful to me simply because the woman had no principles, which frankly allowed me to have none myself. Her indifference to identity-theft allowed her to go out with any guy who looked at her twice, which, let me add, guys rarely ever did. The infidelities she had maniacally accused me of for more than three years she proved to be guilty of herself quite naturally, but why be honest? I once knew a woman, a middle-aged multiple divorcée—she was a commercial airplane pilot and in her deceit flew more different colors than a Caribbean reef-squid—whose suspicion of me was in direct and *exact* moral and geometrical opposition to the very infidelities that she herself had been pursuing behind my back for six months with an Italian greaseball who had an IQ lower than a pro golf score! It is all a question of the human persona. It can be summed up in a sentence. The mask is by definition exactly what the face can never be.

"I trust no one. I once had a serious relationship with a woman who at one time needed a lawyer after a dimwitted garage mechanic

ruined her car by forgetting after an oil change to replace the plug, but the lawyer whom I had worked hard to get for her, a guy who was supposedly my friend, in a sly, back-door move characteristic of our thieving and opportunistic profession actually made a deal with the auto mechanic to subvert the claim among themselves, which infuriated me, until, that is, I found out later that the woman, who actually had a case of scoliosis that put me off sexually, revolted me, in fact, had been secretly rutting with a greaseball neighbor behind my back during this entire time, a matter which she guilefully defended by turning around and spitefully calling me queer—a vicious and predictable calumny, as everyone knows, that can be leveled against one by any disgruntled woman whose sexual advances are either thwarted or rudely unmet. The same thing happened to Warholic. I helped annul a brief if wayward first marriage of his to a fat, fifty-year-old mentally-ill harridan with whom no one got along, a madly jealous professional victim always barging around on huge feet and always ready to cavil—a chameleon in search of a color—who went utterly crackers at times. She had the temper of Bluebeard. She rifled his desk, read his mail, monitored his phone calls, even defaced his books, charged him with having secret affairs, fanatically interrupted him at every turn, and flatly refused him privacy, rattling the door to his office, stomping into his bedroom on any whim, often waking him out of a dead sleep. She accused him of being a pedophile and of boasting about both the value and provenance of the engagement ring he gave her and of reading fashion magazines strictly from lust and of hiring an artist to do a painting on his wall that he claimed he had done. 'Masturbator!' she would howl at him through her big teeth. 'Masturbator!' 'Masturbator!' Her penchant for telephoning the police with lies of every stripe and writing out restraining orders led not only to the big final showdown but eventually in her actually marrying the slow-thinking red-faced cop who had come by with such frequency to settle their domestic disputes. It wasn't a wedding, it was a grunion run, with each of them swandangling the other. They lived happily never after. We are all dogs, E^2. There is no one who lives beyond the age of twelve who does not deserve sonorous oblivion. Blame-shifting is mankind's favorite crutch, Eyestones. We are weasels to a one. Misshapen jackals. No one can face the truth.

"My secret affair with Laura lasted for more than three years. She was living with Warholic all that time. Their relationship was a fiasco.

I do know that being cuckolded meant nothing to him, nothing, as long as he was not being publicly humiliated, for he was up to all sorts of almost unmentionably weird sexual shenanigans himself, perverted things, voyeurism, urolagnia, coprophilia, piggy-in-the-blanket, you name it, that is, when he was not sitting in his room in his big underwear in a food coma, sweating profusely, surrounded by piles of empty boxes of Chinese take-out. He traded in sexual innuendo but was sexless himself. He went nightly skipping out without Laura, who would telephone me, and I'd stop over. When drinking, she was always cracking wise unless undergoing one of her mood-swings, when at every opportunity, because she never saw the donut, only the hole, she was constantly throwing her father under the bus, I recall. She despised that guy. I gather her mother was also some sort of fat, spaced-out, malady-prone parentriloquist whom she avoided like diphtheria. Meanwhile, although Warholic was off to one of the local clubs trying to insinuate himself with any klub kids there, he was sexually and socially frustrated, being so homely and flaccid and bald with that hooter of a nose which looked like the bent rivet-tip of an oxyacetylene torch, that he would get drunk and, becoming angry and growing hostile, begin mercilessly shoving people off barstools and spoiling for fights which he always lost. Later, I would invariably find him in the men's room, mingily incoherent and dark green, one hand flat on a wall, slumped against a urinal, his dead urine falling rather than spurting out of him—prostate problems?—like water from a slum drain. As a lawyer, I also got him off on a rape charge that he had committed in an attic up near Seal Point—he had used an old Nehi bottle to violate a drunk teenager—a case for which he owed me big time, *big* time, which is how I got this particular job in the first place, returning to New England where I was born and where, you may notice, I consistently do very little for huge pay. Don't be envious. It was Warholic's mother's money that he employed, not his own, to start up this journal in the first place. The woman was a moneybag. Warholic, who couldn't find his own ass with two hands, needed her help. For years he floundered around doing all sorts of sleazebag projects. He worked as a goddamn mohel in the Jewish community—can you believe this? —and for a while even as a self-appointed kosher cop for a quick buck. A fucking food rabbi! He'd walk into factories, dunk a chicken, inspect a bag, I don't know, smell meat and then just whip out a pad and a big inspection stamp and bang it down! You might be surprised to learn

that not a single organization exists that governs the more than 800 or so official agencies that certify Hebrew foods as kosher. Any dork in town can do it! Change your name to Shapiro or Teitlebaum or Grazer, draw up a logo, and you yourself can certify! Warholic had schemes up the ying-yang, each one nuttier than the next. I know, I saved his bacon many a time. But I assume you knew that, didn't you? That it was his old lady—to whom the remora Laura, by the way, constantly wrote whining and hand-wringing but ultimately ineffective letters about her belligerent son's cruelty—who had given her idiot son the cash to come east and fund *Quink*? I was eventually called upon to bring a lawsuit against Laura, but it turned out that my services were no longer needed after she got an abortion—her second, I was told—from a quack underground abortionist in Oakland named Dr. Mixter, a slimy and debauched weasel with a gross toupee whom she like others had to fuck for free in order to get vacuumed and whose dark morbidity and angry presence in that dungeon of a clinic, I had more than once been assured, was one if not the best of arguments that his desperate and lonely patients could find for not bringing new life into this world. The irony of it all. Eyestones? That was my baby. It was not fat Warholic's. Warholic is as sterile as space. I didn't tell you? Oh yeah. Whenever he got horny and was out drinking with another guy, they'd sex-hunt squirrely girls in pairs like red-tailed hawks that in their pursuit make futile any attempts of a find dodging from one side of a branch to the other, but when they'd get up to the room Warholic could only sit there and watch, whinnying like a eunuch. I've heard it all, chapter and verse. His impotence aggravated Laura but nothing really mattered in their farcical marriage or in the way that they lived, joyless as jackstraws and stripped to the wheels, nothing, that is, until they started screwing each other financially, for it turns out they were basically cohabiting only to save money. His money. Her room. A single sty. No lock. Sheet curtains. Cinder-block-and-plank bookshelves. Chipboard walls. Dirty dishes in the sink. Garbage bags strewn here and there. I never saw such a hovel. I hate that goddamn city.

"San Francisco sucks! You can never find a taxicab. Every asshole in the city jaywalks. Yuppies! Dot-commers! Twinkies! It's a fucking fruit farm! Nut-butter heaven. A silly symphony in Q, for *query*! Delivery trucks are always double-parked. There is virtually no street parking. The curbs are so high—fucking *buttes*!—I've fallen off them! Women who for the cant of the hills are unable to wear heels tend to run not

because they're late but because it is too steep to walk normally! Every goddamn spot in the city is either uphill or down, so every human with a head is geometrically formalized at a steep angle like begoggled Harold Lloyd hanging from the hands of a clock! Who is surprised that the Mission District was created by pushing rubble into the bay? Rush-hour there is insane—a traffic-controller's nightmare. Staggered traffic lights are always red when you get to them, and so with endless combination of restricted left turns and one-way streets you have to drive for hours to get anywhere not straight ahead of starboard! It's the devil's chessgame! It's next to impossible to turn south, for if you get north of Market Street above Union Square and take a wrong turn, you can never get back! My question is: *Why is that a problem?* Go to Eugene, Oregon, instead!

"San Francisco! Only in such a spangled imaginary of twinkitude and bath-culture existing within and below a notionally common American culture could there have been enacted a *Dance-Away Nutcracker*, performed on Christmas day of course by the Lesbian/Gay Freedom Collective, in which any fairy or fata so inclined was invited to appear wearing his or her own tits or tiara or tutu! Are you surprised, let me ask you, to learn that there are more than three times as many psychiatrists in the City of Buttock Love as there are in the average American city? I could go on. It's freezing in the morning and blowing wind in your face. Candlestick Park is a summer igloo. I've been blown twenty feet standing in front of the old State Building at Golden Gate and Polk! Nobody in the city is a native, paradoxically turning most of the people there into the kind of rabid and defensive sectionalists, trying to belong, that most converts demonstrate as their besetting vice. Try to get anywhere fast on those antediluvian trolleys in that buggered-up city. Buses never come on time and whenever they do appear, they always come bowling in hot for passengers two or three at a time. People don't actually *walk* there, ever notice, but rather meander, following, needless to say, the now decade-long yuppie rubric of devoting an entire morning—'California matins,' I call it—to purchasing a cup of coffee. Not just a cup of joe, mind you. Oh no, not in San Francisco. We're talking about a Starbucks African blend or Frappuccino or triple-shot double-decaf non-fat whole soy-milk malted latte with wings to go, which, while taking little sips from it, they hamhandedly proceed to squire around the office or the streets or a park all morning like a fucking trophy! I cannot stand looking at

them.

"That's not all that bugs me. So many of the unprepossessing buildings in that city—what I call 'anger architecture'—are incontestably grotesque, what in his day Bret Harte, a local, sardonically referred to as 'Union Pacific Renaissance.' Pathetically, both of the big building booms in San Francisco coincided with the emergence of ugly architectural styles, such as those monstrosities-on-columns from the late 1970s like the Embarcadero Center or the Alcoa Building with colonnades as drafty as wind tunnels in which you are always freezing your ass off, and then those overly fussified stone-clad piles from the 1990s that no one can stand to look at. There is no "square" in Jackson Square. The Coit Tower is modeled after a *fire-hose nozzle*! The architecture of the City Hall was stolen from the national Capitol. One gets glimpses of rusty relics from Guadalcanal down by the decaying wharves and water-rotted pilings. This a place you want to leave your heart in?

"What else would you expect from a city, hyena-hooped and heterodox, built by fat Sacramento merchants and foppish railroad tycoons and fast-talking middle-brows followed by a century of social flutterers and parvenus and the revolting kind of craven, imitative snob-weasels who yearn to have their houses photographed for use on glossy tourist postcards, yahoos not satisfied to imitate the styles of Boston and Philadelphia and New York but who, feverishly waving cash, went galloping bum-over-beezer over to Europe to dismantle and destroy countless rooms from Swiss chalets and French chateaux and English country houses only to freight the lot back here, pipes to purlins, and hastily reassemble them in suburban Woodside and Hillsborough and Babbitville?

"It is still a petty, provincial dorp, built on a racist and melancholy past. After all the Chinese immigrants were brought in to build the transcontinental railroad in the 1860s—completed in 1864—those same hardworking folk were vilified, beaten, and murdered during the 'Yellow Peril' hysteria of the 1880s when a ban was summarily placed on Asian immigration to the United States. I suppose if you squint, hard, one could call San Francisco multicultural; I'd say pluralistic. I mean on any street you can stumble across a foreigner faster than you can get a blowjob in Glen Canyon Park or a hump in the Hotel Casa Loma! I've told all this to fat R. Bangs Chasuble in the office, and he goes, 'What a hoot—I'm a divisadero!' There are about seventy-five

coffee chains on every block, hordes of homosexuals, tourists 'til Tuesday, too many pigeons, a lot of them one-legged—why?—and every single place you go you see hundreds of whey-faced *mimes*, the biggest pains-in-the-ass on the planet! They are literally everywhere! What a wacko world! There are actual city ordinances prohibiting violence against *trees* in that city! It is *so* annoying! The same hopeless crafts people and wonderbunnies appear at every flea market! The city's a goddam microworld. I see the same fey, farcical fops everywhere, at every turn, from the oval parks to the overexpensive tea-shops to the same disgusting and odorous little taqueria on every corner. Nine-tenths of the stuff you buy in Chinatown comes from Japan or Korea. Tourists stupidly pronounce Gough Street 'Goo' Street. The *San Francisco Examiner* is always filled with misprints and in one edition even misspelled its own name! The city—so-called Giants fans who know nothing about baseball—never even liked Willie Mays or ever forgave him for being a New Yorker whereas, if you can believe it, the fans stupidly preferred rookie Orlando Cepeda instead just because he started out his career with them! You can't tell half the time in San Francisco who is wearing drag and who isn't, like the entire waitstaff at the Club Asia where men dressed like women refer to themselves as 'gender illusionists'! Get a *name* for it! What hypocrisy! I remember how that whole army of crow-trodden and unmakeupless dykes in the 1970s with their bald heads and gun-holsters and muffs like old raccoon hats spent fucking years trying to seduce innocent girls into bed on the grounds of *political* bonding! 'Down with Chauvinist Pigs!' 'Stand Tall for Sisterhood!' 'Up with Women!' Yeah, sure. And of course no matter where you look there is no end of angels unchained with chopped hair and ghostly skin and nose rings.

"The worst thing about San Francisco is that everyone is always trying to *sell* you the damned place*!* 'It's my favorite city!' 'I'd live nowhere else!' 'It forever calls to me!' Song and sermon. All that drum-beating civic fucking boomism and sectionalistic horseshit is actually a form of hypochondria, am I right? Who was it who said that California is like an artificial limb that the rest of the country doesn't need? If San Francisco is queen, the Golden Gate Bridge, the world's leading suicide location, is her tiara. Never mind that there's a suicide every eighteen minutes in this country, how about motif #1? The guard rail up there—no wonder I'm a gephyrophobe and fear heights to boot—is only four feet high, which is not exactly a *barrier!* Why is it a surprise to

find in the City of Jumping Without a Parachute a wide constituency for the spiritual importance of yoga urgicenters, unisex bathrooms, and no end of grind-and-coffee shops? All pets should be allowed to be citizens and everything from poison oak to botulism to the mange to crotchrot has a right to exist. No wonder the late film-critic Pauline Kael, a native San Franciscan, once famously said, 'San Francisco is like Ireland. If you want to do something, you've got to get out.'

"Anyway, Warholic, who stole money from Laura and treated her like dogshit, drove her to writing insanely jealous letters to all the whores he was seeing. She was homely, ignored, angry, desperate, poor. *La flaca*—'the thin one'—all the spics used to call to her as she walked by. '*Chica! Chica!* they'd go. Jive black guys in fishnet tank-tops and bandannas, monkey-poor and hideously soxless in long shoes, would pitch all kinds of shit at her, like 'Hey, Chicken Legs!' 'Whassup, dawg?' they'd say. 'You wanna get down on this, bitch?' Another'd say, 'You fiend for that shit? Thass *thinnnn* shit, man! Dry pipes! She a sea donkey! A no bro ho! Bitch look like hammered shit!' I can still see in my mind's eye a puzzled and directionless Laura with split-pea earrings and wearing a mauve T-shirt and big clunker shoes and somehow always just below the resolving power of the eyes as to what she was up to looking back at them and even flirting! Maybe her poor fool of a husband saw that himself. Around that time, Warholic tried to strangle her over the cost of a telephone bill one night, and I am talking *strangle*, Eyestones, with his big fat blue hands–cheeseboards!—like I'm talking loony tunes, OK? The police always had to go racing over to their place to mediate fights, writing him up in the middle of midnight as a 'deuce'—a drunk—and her as a '5150,' which is police code for half nuts! She truly hated the fat prick, which is why, as I say, she began to see me all the time on the sly. I realized only later that, characteristically, she was merely 'tooling for roof,' you know, fucking somewhere for a place to say. She took me for a rich lawyer. She sponged off me, visited my house, slept over, accepted gifts, took money, used me for rides to do jobs, let me pay for her food, you name it. She used to whine that I never took her out—you know, to restaurants, movies, stuff like that. Like I was going to spend major *money* on her? In public? A miserably married woman? Who's contentious? Angry? With a face that would make a freight train swerve to take a dirt road? I remember for some reason she was always hot to watch these sick performance-artists down by 16th and Valencia Street or on stage at places like Thimbles or

Red Dora's Bearded Lady Café over on 14th Street, people like Irma the Impostrix splenectomizing the cat of herself in ten seconds and Marcelline the Cyberslut humping his own father on stage and Sister Soul-Spit and her team of six riot grrrls, certifiable she-devils who lit matches off their nipples and crushed beer cans with their tits! Ask me why Laura was so consumed by performance art, weirdo 'zines, movies, clubs. You above all should know why, Eyestones. Only because popular culture in this country—news, magazines, television—depends solely on who is fucking whom, and that was her only interest in life! She was in the perfect city for it: Bupperville!

"The two of them lived like ferrets! I used to bump into Warholic and his wife shopping, he a fat, coked-up man-balloon with his hair at the time cut into a Chicago boxcar on top with a duck's ass, and she an ugly mullion carrying a string bag! Where was R. Crumb when you needed him? They used to hang out with all the dunces around Dolores Park and that ratty world around the Polk Gulch neighborhood. It was a rude little crowd, grubby beyond words, all living south of the Slot, down by the purlieus of Eddy Street—*Slutstrasse*—a layabout's heaven of thirty-cent drinks, porno movies, sex shops, transvestites, grunge-mutts, pop-o-pietists, mentertainers, priestesses, homo-nazis, reptologists, aerobisex girls, thin, fanatical Godbotherers, erotopriestesses, rubber-tramps, social losers, interplanetary sex-cowboys, black arts magicians, all sorts of queers and nature-mystics revolving around there in that eerie kind of nightmarish dung-green light that one usually sees only in terrariums, no doubt the same kind of lunatics and criminals that went shoving through the batwings of old saloons and went running wild during that period before the Second Vigilance Committee when Franny's Crisco was the most lawless town on the American continent. Whenever I went walking down Market Street in the Mission District, I used to get nauseous from the stench of vomit, urine, and alcohol. I would find myself beginning to pray for a cold wind—until the wind arrived. Then it was brutal. Do you recall Mark Twain's memorable remark? He was right: 'The coldest winter I ever spent was summer in San Francisco.'

"Where are the anti-vagrancy ordinances in that damned city, tell me? I have never seen a place with so many self-destroyed and fissiparous panhandlers in all my life, all of them street-people looking for handouts and drifting about with artillery fungus and vacant eyes and empty pockets! There are more deranged people after dark on

Market between 6th and 7th streets than in downtown Bombay! Mind you, all those filthy self-cherishing bums and assholes-in-army-fatigues, crab-ridden beggars-in-rags and groin elves—unlike in Boston or New York City or in Detroit—dipsos and pandering yobbos are from season to season always thawed out. Is it any wonder that in such a bug-ridden but flourishing counterculture the virulent and ravaging AIDS and HIV epidemics would hit first and hardest? That for more than a quarter of a century there buboes on the skin have been as common as bee-bites? That San Francisco also ranks first in per capita primary and secondary infectious syphilis cases? Drunks, aging hippies, thrill-kill cultists, fumivores, wacko pantheists, skank pilots! Who hasn't been loosed on those meandering and godforsaken streets? I can't rub their hideous faces from my dreams and nightmares! No wonder safe sex is the *only* sex in San Francisco. And they think it's elegant! And responsible! Love someone? Snap on a rubber! Yank on a safe! Now there is elegance, wot? Nobody in the city fucks anymore without that obligatory dishwashing glove. Fucking mechanovenusians! It's Latexville or nothing there. I was always told that sex is a pleasure, not an obligation; was I wrong? Let me frank with you. I would rather step on a rusty rake than rut in a rubber! *Safe sex!* San Francisco! I could not hope to think of a better capitol for the lack of conscientious sanity. Losers, serodiscordant couples, metrosexuals and madmen, para-parents, clerical gamahuchers, chucklesbians, dim HIV mendicants, and incorrigible rock weevils! I have seen them all! Pedophiles, rusty trombonists, dioxidlers, fat chainmail-wasters, rug-muts, phenowomeron, dyke dowds, ugly flimps, and blind cripples! I've been approached by them all! Blow monkeys, sexual simpletons, and forty other nogoodniks of the crazy, addle-pated, directing nonexistent orchestras, blithering as-you-are-he-as-you-are-me-and-we-are-all-together variety! I have pried off my arms the clutch of their verminous fingers, their bony, desperate grips! Whole passels of cadaverous unappetizing weakerthans, hairy gutterpunks, some mentally retarded, all mad hunters of crumbs joining other insane pongoids with cartfuls of rubbish to loiter in the medianstrips, all loud, aggressive degenerates without any sense of limits who approach you as if they knew you to ask for the *exact amount* of change! *Four thousand people there live outside on the streets like wharf rats and alley cats!* The place could be Dacca! Almost two hundred homeless people—all preventable deaths—die every year!

"It's a city of cold wind, too many tourists, live sex-acts, crooked

streets, corrupt faith-healers, micro-climates, disgustingly overfamiliar waiters, filthy fogbanks, branding-and-scarification studios, semi-bald queers with long torsos, idiotic comic-book collectors, lunatic psychics, freakoidal shoes, baggy khakis, x-rated birthday cakes, gussied-up houses, too fucking many pastel colors, and over-rich food. But say goodbye to it soon. The big one is coming, right? Retrofitting houses won't do squat! The eastern half of the Bay Bridge, anchored in mud, is so badly in need of repair that when the next earthquake comes, that and the entire city will go sliding like hot molasses into the blue Pacific!

"So anyway, after more than three years of seeing me and giving me shit about loving me, Laura mails me—*mails me*—a one-page letter telling me that she had suddenly met someone else and that I should leave her alone. Meanwhile, of course, she was broadcasting to others that whatever *I* said could no longer be taken at face value! I remember hearing her tell of how she hated Duxbak—someone at the office told me—and called him 'A fruit-loop short of a bowl.' Like she should talk, with those two spazo sisters of hers. Oh I knew them. She is insane *and* a hypocrite! I can't begin to count the amount of time and money I wasted on that spindleshanks and the aimless and inconsequential Braille-trail of her pathetic life, not by the way that she was ever grateful. Thoughtfulness with her was as rare as a black jockey! What's so amazing is that, according to her, she deceived me solely on the grounds that eventually I would have done the same thing to *her*, quite seriously concluding as if by algebra that by her own argument she herself was therefore being honest! Analyze that in your column, Eyestones! I realized that Laura—like a wine bottle, always on her back—was always a whore, for in the way of true self-betrayal she paradoxically prostituted herself—*pro* means 'before' in Latin, as you know, *statuere* 'to place'—by having surrendered any personal dreams or growth of self in order to place anything, anything whatever, in its stead, repudiating even herself. I mean Valerie Vomit, the Garbage Pail Kid! Wouldn't she have been a far more honest person if she had been working the intersection of Larkin and Post like a real scrubber? Yet I pitied her. Can you believe it? Pitied her! Felt *pity* for her! I also hated her. A plus and a minus! I both hated her because she was cowardly—curiously, it was her cunning that actually made her diffident—and pitied her because she was continuously stupid. Ignorant. Dopier than airplane glue! Couldn't find ugly in the middle of

a fucking Mount Holyoke mixer! Do you believe that everything deep is veiled? No? Well, I do. I honestly can't explain it, maybe it's only that scared money always loses, but because I wanted to get over her for good, really over her, I realized that the best way to do so was not to avoid her, no—you figure it out—but to keep seeing her and *seeing* her more and more and more. Do you see? Are you following me? Don't you find that you are doing the same thing in seeing her? Is it to find two negatives to kill the pity in order fully come to hate her and therefore—Alt + F4—escape? As I did? To prove to yourself once again her lack of worth? Or by reinforcing your deficiency punish future error, oscillating between disgust for myself and a plea for cure? Do you get me?

"I remember wanting two things to happen when she told me about this new guy she met. One, I was going to find out who it was, simply because she refused to tell me, thinking she could get away with it by sneakiness and dissembling. Are you following me? Never mind the noise in the marketplace, as they say, pay attention to the price of the fish. And then two, *I wanted to see Laura again in order to hate her all the more! Can you understand the concept here? Repeatedly having to see her in order not only to confirm by further evidence that I was not mistaken but to prove that I was initially correct in what I had first thought of her? Be with the bitch in order to leave her?*

"Smash cut to two weeks later. One afternoon I walked over to the law office where she was working as a secretary at the time, the kind of place from which she often telephoned, begging to visit *me*. She came out of the office, I remember, it was February 22nd, and I was wearing an old khaki dogface military jacket and carrying a knapsack. I was standing out in the hall, when she came striding out to see me looking exasperated and more homely than ever—it's what we refer to in the law as an 'attractive nuisance'—but I was determined to talk to her. I tried coyly to find out the name of this new lover of hers by abruptly, you know, snapping my fingers while stuttering for a name, you know, casually referring to him in mid-conversation. But did she bite? Negative. I tried to say a few words, told her I missed her, lying of course, but she abruptly cut me off, fobbing me off with some shit about having to get back to work—and then she just walked away. Laura, are you listening? That was your mistake. You hear me? For your coldness to me at that moment, for your smugness at that moment, I decided that someday you were going to pay. I could lie awake until the end

of time and still remember that moment, E². That last image I had of that cheap fucking article of commerce furiously striding off around the corner to her little cubicle in a stiff off-white skirt on ugly bow legs like a chinstrap penguin is one I have to confess I have not only retained to this day but will forever, I promise you. I made a vow right then and there I wanted nothing more on earth and nothing less than one day to make her feel *exactly* as I did at that moment.

"Call it revenge. Call it justice. Call it fair-play. Call it anything you want. I am only telling you what I felt.

"A plan was hatched, one I put immediately into operation. I went for a walk to think in the tranquil Muir woods. Hey, don't fight forces, I said to myself—*use them*! Desperate times call for desperate measures. Was there a pattern? There was. There was, indeed, 'Take the handiwork out of this handkerchief,' Iago ordered his wife. Design is jujitsu, E², using your opponent's strength, her guile, instead of fighting it. I decided to snare my prey by following the geometry of the spider's web which, while it appears curved, is composed of all straight lines: spokes, cross-bows, rungs. I decided to offer blandishments but be black splurge. I decided to be ineradicably precise. I decided to become Rumplestiltskin. I decided to war-game the fucking lot of them, squeeze the life out of her future dreams, and turn them white as rubber! So I set to the task of seeing it through. Remember the deep Wildean principle that anarchy is best practiced within the confines of codified behavior?

"Immediately upon making inquiries about Laura from a mean-spirited former boyfriend of hers in New York, a paunchy, balding lame-o named Lumpkin, the kind of huge, oafish, lard-assed networking braggart and hanger-on given to gossip who is always keen to broadcast what and who he knows, I received in the mail a single-page fax she had boastingly sent to him and he to me about her relationship in San Francisco with some drummer from a rock group named Scooter. She said Scooter was a has-been, described him as being into drugs, and said she had slept with him fifteen or sixteen times, that he was married but that his wife had moved out. As I say, Laura's downfall was always her big mouth. In the fax, Laura had cattily and of course indiscreetly remarked that this wife of his was a pretty brunette, suggesting by invidious implication of course that that alone was reason for her to hate the woman! She also mentioned in passing but with notable self-aggrandizement that they had gone to a Dead

concert in Oakland, where he had been talking with Bermuda shorts-wearing Jumbo Ben ('The Nebbion') Mews, a hideously tall infonaut-cum-music-reporter for the *Bay Guardian*, one of the alternative newspapers in the City of the Buttocks-As-Entry-Not-Only-As-Exit! It was the last communication I ever received from dumbo Lumpkin of the bald head and fat thighs who, doubtless having suspiciously spoken to Laura about my questions—part of his networking—was warned by her to send me nothing else.

"I telephoned Jumbo Ben Mews and claimed, as a music agent, that I was trying to reach a guy named Scooter whom a friend of mine, I added, said he had met at this recent Grateful Dead concert. 'Scooter Conolly,' he said. Of what group? He replied without pause, 'The Fukrots. And they suck.' I determined right away, in order to undermine Laura in a classic end run, to try to ascertain who this guy's *wife* was—to reach her, to talk to her, and to put her in the picture, so that, completely reversing the tables, I could implicate both Laura and her duplicitous husband in order to, how shall I put it, square the circle? What perfect joy, what indescribable delight, to be able to share with this stranger, gossiping and glib, the *exact* kind of conversation—*with virtually the very same words!*—that Laura and her new boyfriend were freely and impunitively having about *me*! Who was it said that knavery is the best defense against knaves? It is a homeopathic truism to which I subscribe! Now, I was determined, in the meantime, to follow each and every breadcrumb through the forest. Except that this was a fog forest. Like the Plutonian city itself, clouded in chill, where the pestilential fog comes wreathing out of the grey sea like some Chinese watercolor and everything vanishes into limbo! Convinced, correctly it turned out, that maybe some clerk at Tower Records on Columbus Avenue, near North Beach, would know where this idiot Scooter Conolly of the Fukrots worked, I was immediately informed by an officious little clerk there—who, let me add, comically held her nose when she mentioned the name of the group—that the guy I wanted was in fact working just down the street at 306 Newbury Street, one of several Al Bum's record shops in downtown San Francisco. So I myself stopped in one day to take a look at this humpgoblin that Laura had a crush on and for my own private delight humorously even asked him a question just to see the look of surprise and shock on his dumb face. What would you suspect a guy named Scooter would look like? He was standing there sorting out CDs like a one-eyed monkey hanging from

a ten-cent balloon and wore a long filthy ponytail. A hopeless fucking drudge ready for earmuffs. 'Excuse me,' I asked, 'Do you happen to have the 45 rpm called "Laura"?'

"'By who?' he snapped.

"I smiled. 'Mutrux and the Mallwalkers.'

"Oh I was Iago, E^2. *I was Iago!* Such fun! What strange, transformative fun! I thought I would be transported from sheer joy! Did the guy suspect any chicanery? I can't say for sure. He looked at me. He took a closer look, gloweringly. Then he sidled away, his poached and angry moon-face a more than apt reward for me, not so much for a wasted afternoon as my two sore feet that felt as if I had been doing the lambada non-stop, all day, as in a way I had. I had found what I'd set out for. He was a pathetic zero in a nuthin'-special job. He was going nowhere. But a job is a home to a homeless man. And he could have it—and have her! It was perfect. I tell you, the act of revenge is one of the most exhilarating feelings on earth.

"My next move, looming as the hardest, was to find out the name of his wife and where she lived and actually try to meet her. I questioned whether it was possible. I had a beautiful young neighbor, Chantry by name, however, who was much younger than the forty-five or so years of the part-time drummer, this record-shop prat, whose dopey narcissism I banked on when I asked pretty Chantry simply to walk in and, given the opportunity I suggested she could easily arrange, flatter this guy who was as dumb as wet leather by expressing her love for his music and explaining how she and a former boyfriend—give him the chance to pick you up, I deviously urged—passionately used to canoodle in the early 1980s to that group's every record. I knew he would oblige her, because Chantry was gorgeous. I am aware of how difficult a thing it was to ask of someone, because I myself loathe fake intimacy. After driving five hundred miles, I once had to spend an entire Thanksgiving dinner with perfect strangers, after a former girlfriend of mine from Moorestown, New Jersey, after having invited me down there for the holiday, then vulgarly chose to visit some distant relatives of hers and in doing so rudely fobbed me off at a separate table with second or third cousins of hers—moronic evangelicals, I distinctly recall—with whom I had to spend not only the entire dinner but the entire day wasting my time. In any case, my neighbor Chantry, who saw the idea as a challenge, obligingly made her visit to the record shop. I cannot help noting with fascination, let me please interject here, how obliging

the accidental helps the historical law! It is nothing less than astonishing to me, Eyestones. For, true to type, including the need like all low adulterers to be superstitiously because guiltily uxorious, this middle-aged rocker actually went and *mentioned his wife's name*: Joan. It's a scullion's name and one that I have always hated. Remember that great line in Shakespeare, 'Greasy Joan doth keel the pot'? He mentioned she was a trash-queen, a magpie, a maven of the town dump where she rummaged around for things like old telephones, dead men's shoes, broken lamps, reparable toys, vinyl records, chipped statues, cola bottles, thrown-away books, frayed rugs, ashtrays, used jackets and such, and then later sold all the junk at garage sales that she held in any impromptu place she could find, even flea markets. What is it about women and acquisition? Tag-sale Annies. Trash-pickers. Catchpoles and bower-birds and vacuum-cleanerettes. I have rarely seen anyone but women at yard sales, old, young, fat, tall, middle-aged mooncows looking for bargains and snatching at anything they can find. In any case, I decided by the principle of the Pythagorean theorem that in order to get back at Laura I would have to focus on Joan. Sometimes to win the audience they say the best way is to sing to just one person, did you ever hear that? How proverbs clear the way for us and point us in the right direction, no? It was Joan's habit, now, to go on Dumpster raids at night with a flashlight. Chantry happily gave me a full report. It was a pluperfect plan, and it came pluperfectly true! I learned that Joan drove an old sun-bleached red Chevy Cavalier, an old shit-wagon nigger-rigged and half rusted, which had all sorts of stickers plastered on the windows and trunk. I looked for it everywhere. Just off Army Street there were a lot of junkyards and industrial lots filled with trash and all sorts of odds and ends. Automobile graveyards, as well, piled up with Plymouth Furys, Monacos from 1966, old Ford coupes, Chevy Chevelles upside-down with those old Powerglide transmissions rusted out like the *Titanic*. I checked there for Joan a few times over the course of a week, but I saw nothing. I thought I once caught a glimpse of the car parked out by Alta Plaza Park not far from a circle of sunburnt hippies sharing a bottle of wine and some sexual buccaneers toking out in the open orbed with a glow of desperation even when they were laughing. Then I went to the dump. After intermittently parking in the swap-shop area of the dump for a few days, alert amid all the crapola, I finally saw the woman, marking her by that outlandish car of hers, and nailed her address in a breeze by following her back to the house

where she lived, her entrance attached to the back of a frumpy old house.

"I saw her several times. She used to bustle about the trash bays like a staff sergeant. I once found her hoisting a porcelain enamel table onto the sagging roof of her car, a final thump flicking down a spray of rust. She had a puffy face and was a big complainer. 'Ever see any granite-ware pitchers, vintage cookbooks, old toasters?' she asked the swap-shop chief, who ignored her. 'Hands off,' she snapped at an old lady who looking like a draggled duck was picking something up. 'I'm taking that doll and calling it Señor Ear of Corn.'

"After some deliberation, I felt I couldn't take the chance of assuming that she would respond to a direct letter, one coming from an outright stranger and all, especially one giving her warnings about her husband and Laura—not if the harpoon was going to find its mark. So I devised another plan. I wrote a letter and typed it up as if written from an acquaintance of Laura's, a woman who, knowing her well and having listened to her boasts, could no longer put up with her nymphomania and was warning her—as well as her husband—to take an AIDS test, especially since Laura Warholic herself had long ago told me that that guy Lumpkin, the lout who had sent me the initial fax and was apparently himself something of a promiscuous asshole, had always been completely injudicious about wearing protection, something I'm told is sadly predictable among the poorly endowed and the insecure, which is, needless to say, two groups standing under the same tent, but you're the man with words, Eyestones, not me, right? In any case, in my letter to Joan, the Queen of Trash, I enclosed a copy of the telltale fax Lumpkin had sent me, making sure to white-out his name at the top, happily wrote down both Laura's home and work addresses, adding both phone numbers, and drove into the country to mail the letter from outside the city, Point Reyes Station, at the southern end of Tomales Bay. It was perfect, Eyestones.

"Nothing to trace. No fingerprints, no trail, no connotations. Cheese dropped, mousetrap set! I fucking heard chuckling in the universe! As ukelelist Tiny Tim once said, 'Believe in your dreams and not in your fears. Never a tassle without a hassle. Originality is the key to success. I'll do my best and pray for the rest.'

"I reasoned, again correctly, that after a week, exactly a week, no longer, I would follow that first letter to Joan with one of my own to her, one from the real me, the real actual me who sits at your side, explain-

ing with some staged bewilderment that I had received, as a former lover of Laura's, more or less the same kind of letter that I was told by the same dark mysterious correspondent she had also been sent, one I imagined that contained pretty much the same low but hardly unexpected information she had received. *Had* she received one? I wrote my legitimate address on the envelope this time, of course, and graciously asked if she would like to get together the next time she was in town, you know, no pressure, easy does it, an offer—XYZR, Eyestones, the Wall Street stock symbol indicating it went through the roof!—that she *readily accepted*! I left my art in San Francisco, E^2. Get it?

"*¡Mision cumplida!* Who was it said, 'Strive to wipe out the enemy when he is on the move'? Mao is who, in his little red book!

"We met at a Starbucks over on Second Street in San Francisco on a rainy afternoon on Hallowe'en, I recall—it was filled, I remember, with a bunch of Asian girls chattering like an aviary in Cantonese or something—and almost immediately we began to share our conjectures about the letter, as with mock surprise, shoulder to shoulder, I guilefully began to review the incriminating words of the telltale fax she so thoughtfully brought with her. It was amazing. I had finally met the woman, cornered her, so to speak, like a rat-catcher! Joan, who was wearing nothing but rag-bag clothes, had a lumpy, broken nose above a brandy-glass chin, an extremely high forehead and, in spite of the fact that she was only in her early thirties or so, a radical case of fallen eyelids, which, ptychotically ugly, to use one of your big words, E^2, not only ruined anything like prettiness in her but made her seem older and sadly misendowed her with a perpetual scowl, the angry look of a flammulated owl. Her drooping eyelids, which recalled for me that quasi-oriental look of that old semi-goofball of an actor Leon Errol, gave her a distinctly paradoxical appearance, as though her eyes, cold as fevrile glass, were both popping out of her head and half-closed at the same time! She had a long torso, narrow waist, and broad shoulders, and always parted her thin dark hair in the middle with two white barrettes. She had small breasts, little grace, and not the trace of an education. She lived, as I say, in a bolthole of a room with no means to cook anything but a hot plate. I accompanied her there a few times. We drove around the Bayshore Freeway a few times, the 'Rhinestone Bracelet,' in her battered car, with both of us talking and getting to know one another. That red dented old shitbox she drove was a real *fayuca*, a roachwagon riddled with flaking orange rust

and so badly out of alignment that it dog-tracked as you rode in it and gave you the feeling the gravity of earth had shifted! I was struck by the fact after I got to know Joan that, at the advanced age of thirty-three while always crowing about her independence, she was still borrowing thousands of dollars from a manic-depressive alcoholic father who living somewhere in Florida was himself nearly broke. I never trusted her for a second. I had her covered. An alert base-runner in the game of baseball, remember, in order not to be picked-off, always watches the *back* leg of the pitcher! Joan, like Laura, was another product of a broken and hateful marriage and divorce. She had a tattoo, picked up hitch-hikers, farmed swap-shops, dove in Dumpsters, disliked children—'I look on pregnancy as a disease,' she once snapped—occasionally posed naked for a various photographers for quick cash, and, as I correctly surmised, was promiscuous—and hey I'm talking mink-humping white-trash promiscuous, OK?—for wherever we happened to be this horizontal-bopper was always in a loud and brazen way—in public, in streets, shops, malls—crudely and shamelessly saluting guys of all shapes and sizes with tattoos and names like Cobra Pants, Jack Beatly, Scott, Ortiz, Spooge, Le Freak, Tom the Junkseller, Snipeman, Bootie, Fishbone, a black rapper called U.S. Ultra, Raybo, a Vietnam vet, and one particular red-faced and drunken fat quack, probably insane, with a full beard and flowing hair dressed in overalls named Gerryberry "Brickface" Burke, who wore a railroad-engineer cap and used to telephone her at midnight with all sorts of unnatural suggestions. I remember once at a drive-in flea market, a spick waiter named Nasdaq from a greasy dive next door called the Intermission Grille asked her out—and she went! We would go to Golden Gate Park, sit among all those ratshit-artists-with-flowers-in-their-hair—California flowers, which are only stems with a photo at the top, have no *scent*, did you ever notice?—and as we lolled about there on the grass, you know, shooting the shit, she not only knew just about every fucking droolie, knob-twiddler, trash-rocker, bocce-bowler, pogoing hooligan, kamikaze banger, and spaz-of-the-day who went strolling by, but they also knew her by *name!*

"Joan was hard, with a grating voice that sounded to me like an electric can-opener. She confessed to entertaining salacious dreams and told me that she and a girlfriend had once pleasurably co-whipped a group of willing slaves for cash, that they had both purchased full rubber bodysuits for, well, let's just say not for deep-sea diving, and that

to her a black man in good physical shape was the epitome of physical beauty. She was always on the make: when I was with her I felt like a linebacker trying to guard a running back. Once I asked what her last name was, and her amazing response was that I was the first person in years who ever asked her that—that the men she knew never used, or even knew, her last name. Does that tell you anything? Sleeping with strangers had left her bored, cynical, and in my opinion a potential suicide, for she confided to me to having called the Samaritans several times in desperation. She was a street person, with a look that said that nothing could ever please, displease, astonish, or delight her. She told me that she had had literally about thirty different addresses in three or four years. When we met that first time, she seemed confused that I had not brought my letter, which of course—how could I tell her?—did not exist. She seemed never to have read a single book. I wanted at first to find her attractive. It intrigued me that she wasn't ashamed to be poor. She appeared to like me, but unexclusively, as I say, so what did it matter? She even occasionally gave me things she had found at the dump. Whenever I went to kiss her, she always quickly turned her head, needing to avert her face—exactly why, I found out only later. I thought of her as a sad brown gardenia. I lost interest in her. It wasn't only that her mid-range IQ she thought infinitely higher than it was, or that she bayed when she laughed. No, her attractiveness was lost in her bent nose in the same way that a tied bag grows ugly at the twist. She was also touchy in an odd way. I remember her once exploding at me like a nutcase for daring to ask her twice if she wanted something to eat. But I was going to complain? When the conversation I had so long sought was finally taking place? It was so neat, so revealing, so perfectly symmetrical, such a turnover, a serendipitous delight recapitulating almost echo by echo all the calumnies that Scooter Conolly had told Laura of his wife and that Laura had in turn so blithely—and so safely, she thought—divulged about me!

"Didn't Clausewitz, the German theoretician of war, blithely tell us that war is but the continuation of politics by other means? That man was my godfather!

"How swiftly turns the wheel of fortune! With what premeditated joy did I confide to Joan every last awful truth and hurtful detail about Laura, every flaw down to her very last wen! With what relish did I recount their joint perfidy! We were twins! Shout snap! Two deceitful fleshmongers believing themselves safe now suddenly caught in the

orchard moonlight by a huge mastiff with dripping jaws! I heard in turn from Joan how her husband was a total loser, a feckless rock musician, a rude, insecure, bullying sod, jealous of the very wife he blamed for the very infidelities he was committing at the very time he believed she thought she was virtuous. He was going precisely nowhere in life. We met fairly often over meals, Joan and I. I took her to the Yerba Buena Center on Mission Street at Third for the Sleazoid Express Film Festival and to the Slanted Door on Valencia Street for the best Vietnamese food in the USA, maybe in Vietnam. I had spicy squid. She ate spring rolls and caramelized shrimp. She was mannerless and oddly fussy, with the hideous habit of actually sniffing her food before each bite, but it didn't matter, none of it. She had become my conduit. My facilitator. Whatever she was, for my own purposes I found her malleable as mud. Gleefully, we discussed 'gaslighting' both of them and eventually by putting our heads together devised the wonderful idea that by us thimblerigging it we could get her to announce to her husband that she was getting postcards mailed to her, reading '?' and signed 'Laura.' The laughable consequence was that a furious Scooter as a by-product would immediately turn on Laura not only for harassing his wife but for betraying their confidence. I tell you, we circularized them like staring rabbits, like soft fucking *bunnies*, man, because other people they knew were also suspected by implication, don't you see?—other whores of his by her, other assholes of hers by him!

"Do you know what a banquet is, my man? Hate was in the air like a flight of ugly white hail! I rubbed my hands with mad glee. We played every delicious trick we could! Never missed a trick. Into the mesh. 'Death by detail,' as Frederick the Great put it. It was so easy. Joan told her husband Scooter on one of her visits to him that every time she left the apartment a woman—with thin, long ears, bowlegged, flapping feet—began suddenly appearing like a stalker on the street, staring at her. Since Joan could describe to perfection the details of his apartment to me, we both came up with a scenario where, accusing her husband of infidelity, she would complain to him that it was *she* who was getting crank telephone calls from some madwoman with intimate knowledge of his apartment who would whisper, 'Has Scooter enrolled you in the Party-of-the-Month Club as he has me?' or 'Did you buy those Snoopy pillowcases in a thrift shop?' or 'Don't touch that Iggy Pop album on top of the bureau' or 'I just love that *cooool* Monoman poster'—and he of course would go completely fucking bananas! And of course as soon

as Joan left town, her husband Scooter, infuriated, would immediately go racing off in order to confront Laura, screaming at her in fury for telephoning his wife, while Laura would turn a ghastly white and Joan and I only had to sit back with our four fat feet up like Br'er Rabbit in his Laughing Place and giggle our asses off! I tell you, all through this ordeal, Laura for all her smugness had to eat more shit than a lame dog in Dacca! 'Remember my chains,' said Saint Paul! 'Remember my carbuncles,' said Karl Marx. 'Remember my cunning,' said Mr. Mutrux! Oh, I tell you, Eyestones, revenge is sweet!

"Well, now you've heard my story. As the Bard puts it so well, 'I have trod a measure; I have flattered a lady; I have been politic with my friend, smooth with my enemy; I have undone three tailors.' But wait, hohoho wait, one moment, for all my talking I see I have left out what is perhaps the best part.

"On a last weekend together finally, the wheel of fortune came full circle, almost as if in a sort of unexpected reward for my unsleeping zeal, say guile, if you will—I had known her for a month—and the opportunity to sleep with Joan Conolly the Junk Queen presented itself. But do you know what? I couldn't do it. I could not *do* it. Was it because her room in a basement on Potrero Street was a complete pigpen, which it was? No. Was it because she had long prehensile toes and told ragtime lies? No? Was it because she had once lived in a commune in Vermont where they believed oxygen is a sacrament? No. Was it because of her deep anti-intellectualism, which was incessant? No. Was it because of her bad manners, which were vivid and unrelenting? No. Was it because she wasn't as close to ten miles as pretty as my neighbor, Chantry, with whom I *did* eventually sleep? No. Was it because she was a sour, scowling pain-in-the-ass who waved to every last guy in town, including bowlegged truckers and all-day suckers and woolly old fuckers? The answer is no. 'I don't subscribe to your idea of a couple,' she once complained to me with that tiny immunocompromised mind of hers that was filled with what jazz musicians in another context call 'head arrangements,' nagging that I had objected to her—to any woman's—habit of picking up hitch-hikers, posing naked for strangers, diving into dumpsters at night, and sleeping with any lonesome dipshit in a shuttered chateau who happened down the highway. Well, you know what I say? I say hey Joanie Poo, my idea of a couple is someone you can kiss and fuck without rubbers. While we're on the subject would you like to guess what I do not subscribe to, Miss

Thumbpoke? Herpes. Which, let me add with dismay, was not uninvolved in her romantic projections of what a couple was. Talk about the gift that keeps on giving! May I ask what worse can you say about anyone than that he or she is unclean? I swear to God, I expected anytime to have to witness her Gypsy skin bubble up into horrible white blisters mixed with the red spots of a maculopapular rash! God knows what else! Buboes! Shingles! *Clostridium perfringens!* And do you know what? She claimed by way of the neurobitchery of blame-shifting that she had contracted the thing from some sloppy old man in a diner who came up to her out of the blue and kissed her, once. Once? *Once*? And only *kissed* her? Oh yeah and I'm the Queen of Romania! Pull the other one, it's got bells on! Look, whether it's Laura, Joan Jett, Ma Kettle, the late weirdo Elena Çeausescu, or Lena Dena Doing the Loop-De-Loop on a Half a Dollar, Eyestones, you know what they say the difference is between true love and herpes? Simple. Herpes is forever. Enjoy your breakfast."

XXI
Fraying Curtains

Weeks passed. Eyestones had been reviewing his columns for the past year. Some controversial ones, some not, but for the most part mostly solid and all in keeping with his basic belief in life that of all topics sex was the most sociologically diagnostic of the problems—the complexities—of the human animal. Some of the ideas he was tossing around to write about were that women at term, for ease, should give birth squatting; that sports in America, totally corrupt on both college and professional levels, have become for many fans not only a weak substitute for sex *but an actual drug*; that birth-order in siblings forms personality; that every single place where the human body can bend is an erogenous zone; that the quality of daytime television is an indictment of the spiritual malaise of American housewives, welfareites, etc.; that in all intimate relations one partner always thrives at the expense of the other. The problem of AIDS intrigued Eyestones as well, and specifically the cause of it, the worst disaster that we can reasonably expect to befall humanity in our lifetime. By 1975, hundreds of pages on the effects of synthetic hormones on Haitians and Africans had been compiled, Third World countries that he suspected were the origins of the virus by way of heedless birth-control experimentation by the fiendishly powerful, absolutely corrupt, government-protected, all-out-price-gouging, iron-hearted, unconscionable pharmaceutical companies in the United States. Although the AIDs virus was always

there, when the immune systems broke down, all zoonotic diseases, even the Ebola virus, were transmissible to any and all immunodeficient creatures eating bush-meat, wild pig, rats, bonobos. Eyestones not only knew that birth-control pills dangerously made uterine walls more permeable—and it is a well-known fact that women get AIDS both faster and easier than men—but that with all of the clinical research done in Africa with trials like the Tuskegee Experiment that ran from 1932 to 1972 studying syphilis, and the Uganda Virus Research Institute's study of polio, measles, yellow fever, and West Nile Fever, the botches were astonishing. Was it simply a striking coincidence that over 25 million people in Africa have died of AIDS? Of the 65 million people around the world who have become infected with HIV to date, most of the victims are located in Africa and Haiti. In the next twenty years, the number of dead, he well knew, could more than double, even triple.

The full implications of sex and advertising also intrigued Eyestones, learning, as he recently had and took note of, that 70 percent of all male underwear is still bought by women, that women, according to statistics, will always look at a picture of a naked woman in a magazine longer than a man will—becoming enviously critical? admiring? seeking comparisons?—and that weak and emasculated males, the unthreatening, eunuchoid, often bald and big ho-ho-hoing reductive cartoon figures repeatedly used in TV commercials, always sell more products to modern women than any alluring, attractive he-men. Why? Had it to do with mastery? Emasculation? The "sovereignty" Chaucer wrote of in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" that women most wanted more than anything on earth, including wealth? Or was it the upshot of an exasperated consciousness that found them crucially disappointed in their own sex and so needful of like mockery?

Toying with another controversial idea, one born of his own fears that Rapunzel Wisht might exorcise, for who knew whatever reason, the Sexual Intellectual pondered the relative worth of this topic sentence: "There is a kind of woman whose greatest power over a man lies in her ability to turn away from him." The passive act fascinated him. It brought Laura to mind by default, whom he had not seen for a while now, a situation that he had increasingly come to find a true blessing.

What interested her in Cambridge was going to the movies to watch noir double features and haunting record stores. She still browsed in

the Garment District and sometimes went for fish-tacos in restaurants. She wasted a lot of time doing nothing, especially after the trip they made across the country, when she could be found conspicuously sitting in small dim cafés with her mental-patient bangs and Watusi-long body reading books like *Loser* and *Addicted to Misery* and *Use Your Anger* and *Whither Prozac*? and *Whine Your Way to Alienation* and *High Fiber Sex*, looking hopeful and trying to meet desperate out-of-work musicians, inartistic jub-jubs, and the kind of bubble-headed losers and trash-culturists who scoured the interiors of such places checking out dawdling women like her to buttonhole and to bang. Once when dropping off Laura at the Garment District they saw Mickey "Mouse" Mewlingshaw hustling out with a cheap used suit over his arm. Eugene tried to avoid him, but he came running over to him, crying, "You'll never guess what? I wrote to Milan Kundera!" "My neighbor, the 'Mouse,'" said Eugene to Laura, who was poking her card in an ATM machine. "Don't you like him?" "With that old white mop? Eee-eww!" He had learned never to buy that kind of exaggerated dismissal by a woman, who often even in a negative remark authenticates a waking state. It was dispiriting to Eyestones to have such thoughts. But he knew for a fact that Laura during one of her biological interludes had once spent the night—with whom he couldn't say—at the Hotel Thirteen; he'd seen the receipt in her flat. At work, Gnorm had also told Eugene he had seen her several times in Boston both at the Paradise Club on Commonwealth Avenue and at the Psychedelic Soul Shack ("Creative Dress Required") on Lansdowne Street at a table drinking scotch and writing in a notebook and then later on a corner sick and doubled over shouting at her shoes. "I once saw her at the Man Ray," said Mr. Fattomale in full teeth, "that creepo leather-bar over on, what, Brookline and Green Street—"

"Where you need to wear black clothes to get in?" blurted Varwick. "Just to get in?"

"Right. Wackos. Seventies disco. Bouncers out front with spraying flashlights. All sorts of queue rage. These here long pink cars with fluorescent tennis balls wagging on top of their car aerials. And, like I say, I walked by and saw her out front talking to one of the ugliest spades on the face of the planet." "I've n-noticed that same guy," Spalatin said. "Was it Bwana Devil—'he *my* nigga!'—the spear-chucker with the walk and the gold teeth and the *come se chiama* on his head?" asked Mr. Fattomale. "She's a fucking head-case, if you ask me." "Mr. Do-

able, they call him," said Gnorm. "Superfly with his fly open." "Right. Buckwheat," honked Spalatin. "'Youse lookin' fo me?'" drawled Discknickers, imitating the Our Gang figure. "'Cause if yo ain't, I mone mosey out o' heah!'" "Hey, whassup dawg?" giggled Varwick, doing an extravagant, head-bobbing, rubbery cakewalk, grinning, flinging out his feet as if trucking up Blueberry Hill. "Whassup dawg? Talk to me, bitch! I'm light, bright, and almost white! Yunnerstan? What I'm sayin, Missus Cosmo? If I pull down my britches, yo, will you pull me like a rickshaw? Know'm sayin? Unnersand wha'm sayin?"

Discknickers's laugh was like a pistol shot, and then with a knowing smirk he told Eugene that he had seen Laura on Hallowe'en night, very late, drinking at the 1369 Coffeehouse on Massachusetts Avenue and several times perched at the bar in the Hotel de Dream—she was no longer welcome at Welfare's, where she had made several horrid scenes—but everyone suspected she spent a few anacreontic afternoons a week with the shades pulled at the Velour Motel. "What about her doing coons?" "I've heard she goes out yo-yoing at the Middle East where all those second-tier rock musicians and groin morons hang out. How can you miss her when she won't go away?

> "O lost Ubangi
> staggering through
> the successive ogives of hell
> down Dante's final
> fire escape"

Discknickers gleefully sang, quoting Ferlinghetti. "But, look, as far as that cocoa-and-cream shit goes, hey, and her 'furnishing the living-room,' as they say, with a few eightballs wearing do-rags," he said, "why is that any worse than her having married a fat sheeny like Warholic with a small weenie—talk about the effects of simultaneous contrast!—and a *shpitz* of a nose longer than a loaf of Jewish rye?"

Having dated Harriet Trombone once after meeting her—encountering her—with Eyestones at an animal-rights demonstration in Cambridge the previous summer ("I love sexual chocolate," he admitted), Discknickers, who had what the French call *un abord horriblement froid*, nevertheless pompously felt for that reason his pronouncement held weight. Eyestones's pretty black neighbor, it turned out, whom Discknickers, to his dismay, in fact surprise, had failed to seduce—she

had been strictly raised in Episcopal schools back in Speightstown in the Barbados, had very high standards, and was completely chaste—quickly identified and dismissed him not only as a posturing fool but as a dyed-in-the-wool racist. Harriet, who had convinced Eyestones that all racism, on one level, is aesthetic, a projection of the "ugly," could not *abide* injustice. "What is it with you people?" she had asked Eyestones, bumping into him at a local Laundromat the very next day. "That white cracker? In those sharp expensive suits? Puttin' out this and that about Jews? I ain't never *heard* of such shit! 'One thing you can say is Jews stick together!' quoted Harriet, fist-shoving a pile of laundry into a machine and mimicking to perfection the adamant, overfastidious, insistent rhythms of Discknickers's belittling voice. 'Jews own the world!' 'Jews run everything!' 'How can you trust a people with a pervert like Lot offering his own daughters to a mob?'" She dropped her clothes basket. "Me so touched! He goes, 'What's all this about this so-called ideal of theirs, King David, who was a sneak, a liar, an adulterer, a cheat, a murderer, and a shit?'" Harriet angrily slapped the washer door and fully turned to Eugene. "No kiddin'! But hey aren't all you motherless bastards the damn kingpins of mistreatment and misery? And yet it's *you* feelin' so put upon all the time! Poor baby! Ain't it touchin'? So let me ask what *is* it with you people? People ridicule us so readily. Did you know that out of all the fifty states in this country, Mississippi, which is composed mostly of blacks, ranks forty-ninth in average national income but sixth for charitable giving as a percentage of income, while the state of New Hampshire, which ranks sixth in average national income and is as white as toilet paper, is forty-fifth—almost last in the nation, brother man—for charitable giving as a percentage of income? An old dog for a hard road, eh? *Listen to your face*! But I'm wastin' my breath, aren't I? Let me tell you why. Because it's all about you. It is all [*slam*] about [*slam*] you [*slam*], en it?" she loudly exclaimed, thunderously slamming the top of the machine. You. You. You." By which she meant that the entire Caucasian race down through history. She knew her history. She read everything she could get her hands on. "Me, me, *me*. What a bunch of bull! Cry me a river and make me care."

"What can I do to help?" asked Eugene.

"I told you what I think, Whitey," said Harriet, taking him in with an aviseful eye, which in spite of her always had a trace of humor in it. "You should all get your white asses out of the country! That's

what I say, out, and don't let none of us see your faces again! You no better than them Jews, OK? Live with it! Wherever the white man goes, there's cruelty, slavery, misery, and death. And why? You stole this country, that jackass Columbus and all of his diseased, syphilis-spreadin', wrong-God-worshippin', women-rapin' devil's spawn, who sailed backwards not being able to read a map, the dumb-ass git, not only to plant an ugly white cross in the heart and soul of the Arawaks but to give typhus, influenza, and smallpox to the most innocent people on earth! There were one million Arawaks around in 1492. By 1548 a scant five hundred! When Francis Drake landed on Hispaniola in 1585, the poor fool could not find a single native left living on the island from Holetown to Headland to Holyville, don't let *no body* say different and you better believe that! A lot of those damn islanders committed suicide by eating the poisonous part of the manioc plant rather than be sold into slavery, darlin', and it was only a few more years before the entire country went to the dogs. Then like night follows day whole ship-troops of white, fat-assed Europeans in big stupid hats come wading in to snatch the rest of the hemisphere, grab Canada, and invade all of South America, not only hog-butcherin' 99 percent of the natives here but the entire race of Incas and Mayans! I mean, have you ever *heard* of such shit? People of my own blood slaughtered like sheep! Did you know George Washington with his dumb brother Laurence came to Barbados in 1751, the only piece of foreign soil he ever visited, in order to recoup from TB? In thanks for his visit what do we get? Nothin'! But let me tell you, brother man, we're no fools down on the islands. We turned around and gave that big tut-mouthed goober smallpox instead, OK? Those are the facts, white man! Now I'd like to open a can of whoop-ass on you!"

"A can of what?"

"You heard me. A can of steamin' whoop-ass!"

"I don't get it."

She backed off in fake shock.

"Whitey playin' the dozens with me?"

Harriet had to stifle a smile, as she often did in the heat of one of those powerful tirades that she gave so often, for her creative explosions, sheer mayhem, involved the sort of hyperbolic rhetoric she delighted in to tweak and to entertain. She nevertheless believed a good deal of what she said. Still, it was something of a game between them, the exchanges, the almost scripted repartee. "Why me?" he asked, laugh-

ing. "I just start with you," she said, pointing a sharp finger at him. "I hate anything white, anything that could be white, anything that looks white, is half-white, near-white, quarter-white, off-white, next to white, likes white, promotes white, encourages white, even tolerates white comin' down the flippin' road. So get to shufflin', friend—back to Europe where you all came from!" Eugene smiled and asked, "All right, but may I leave tomorrow?"

"What's the delay? Last time I checked Logan Airport was open. It shut down, mister man, and I don't know?"

"I . . . I have laundry to do," he joked.

"Bite me, Whitey!"

"And have no detergent."

"Not my problem!"

"Come on, baby mama."

"*Excuse you*?" asked Harriet with exaggerated indignation. "Get to steppin', white man! We'll take an apology and a quick exit, OK? Give all this stolen land back to the Lakota Sioux, the Cree, the Ojibway, the Huron, the Iroquois, the Navajo, the Blackfeet, the Pawnee, all of them, the Seneca, the Cheyenne, Algonquin, Chippewa, Mohican, the Hopi, the Cherokee, Apache, Ohione, Comanche, and especially the Wampanoags, right here in Massachusetts! Ninety-nine percent of Native Americans are gone, brother man! You ever hear of the Wappo, the Tubatulabal, the Miwok, or the Assiniboin tribes? You ever meet any Caddo or Hidatsa or Sarcee or Manticoke? They were Americans! *Were*! Ever run into the Yuchi, the Tutelo, the Dogrib, the Chitimacha, the Pomo, the Pima"—she spat the names out with machine-gun speed—"the Ponca, the Pope, or the Papago? The answer is no and want to know why? *You killed them all!* So I say kill whitey, OK? And that includes Jewboy Jesus who is up there in the clouds playin' with his hair, *another* whitey! You honkies don't have a flippin' clue what we're up against, jacko! Like we worthless! We invented the stop sign, open-heart surgery, and deep-freeze refrigerators! But what has that got us? The back of your hand? No wonder we want to run a broom up your cools! We're treated like dirt, especially black women. Every honky and his donkey thinks he can walk a road in a black woman's bum! No wonder black men in this country of the lynch mob have such a low opinion of themselves, humiliated, as they are, to have to come home to take it out on their wives or go ass-mad out of despair and turn to crime!" She slammed the machine hard. "*What else do they have*?" She

kneed the door hard. "But let me tell you somethin', Whitey, a change is gonna come, yes it is! When worlds collide, OK? You getting' the picture? Even now I can detect the smell of lovely chink napalm in the morning! Mmmm-*mmm*! Egg fooooo yung!"

It was Harriet Trombone's unswerving belief and ungainsayable conviction that in the twenty-first century hordes of Chinese from the People's Republic were going to invade the United States and engage all interloping white slavers in a final race war in which they would all kill each other and black people alone would be left.

"Yellow gonna kill whitey, I predict, and black gonna have a barn dance! Bang! Bang! Bang! Spear-chuckers of the world, unite! Don't doubt Jehovah! That's right, white man, our turn is gonna come!" She drew her hand across her neck in a sharp cutting motion. "Four hundred years of slavery! Treated lower than dirt by all you low crackers! Mocked and vilified and hung high in the fruit trees! Well, that's gonna end! We gettin' justice! And when you all suin' for mercy, you couldn't pay me to care! So I say get to shufflin', OK, Mr. Overseer? All of you! Move! Now! Get out! Get crackin'! Eskimo and Weskimo, hanging judges, working drudges, freak-o, slim-o, bimb-o, demon-seed redpeckerwood *scuuum*! We ain't takin' *no* shorts! All you no-good, two-faced, lyin', cheatin', stealin', gold-grabbin', pope-obeyin', smallpox-givin', continent-pollutin', native-butcherin', shifty-eyed, low-down, green-monkey-humpin', drug-traffickin', bomb-throwin', buffalo-huntin', TB-spreadin', country-thievin', food-hoardin', pale-skinned, ugly-ass nitwits get your asses back to Squinttown and Germantown and Frogville and Guinea Wop Dago City!"

For all his slickness and urbanity, Discknickers could not help but find Harriet Trombone on the few dates that he had had with her as unpredictably complicated as he blacks. "Divide and conquer this!" she had told him in no uncertain terms. ("I have been found Laura Warholic simplemindedly desperate and dangerously simple. She had refused flat-out to let him with all his racial theories run down Jews in order to flatter given the frozen mitt for which she is famed," he said.) Of course Discknickers made the same tired old case in his reports to Eyestones of the availability, gullibility, and accessibility of women during any of the *cinq à septs* he arranged with casual avidity whenever he decided to. But whereas Harriet was vigorously intelligent and unmistakably pure—she was street-tough and knew men up and down—Laura was weak, immoderate, lazy, dependent, craven, almost always

on the prowl and, worst of all, passively resigned to despair each time life did not reveal itself as a miracle, which meant having no man.

Eugene was not surprised. Laura in her doldrums could bear anything but staying home alone and so of course on most nights went out, even back in those days when he used to care for her, during the very time when she was claiming, while secretly dating others, that she wanted to learn to be alone. He recalled that old saw about how to make God laugh—tell Him your plans! It was hardly surprising, therefore, she who was completely cowed when she found herself alone was typically willing to dare almost anything when reinforced by company, not necessarily loving hearts, but merely acquaintances whom she sought out almost as props to act a scene. It was one of her corrosive ploys to look boldly and directly at him and admit she was neurotic. "I know, I know, I have to see a therapist," Laura would snap, imperiously flinging back her hair and, slipping another cassette into her recorder, only to put the volume up high. Nothing transforms the face more than resentment, and Laura's weak resolves, as she turned her head to him, always revealed such pockets of nothingness. Eugene with unease recalled one night back in Kansas during that summer they took their trip she sat bolt upright and in a tight panic screamed, "*I am someone else!*" When is a way of seeing not double? wondered Eyestones, who answering himself said never.

Rather than writing his column on the subject the intrigue instilled by someone turning away from us, especially in the light of Laura occasionally doing so and *not* beguiling him, Eugene pondered a few others: the incongruous ideas of modesty and immodesty around the world; negative love and the dodges of emotion; love that craves suffering.

It was a joy to ponder in his days alone the secret in his heart of beautiful Rapunzel with her high cheekbones and eyes of green fire. Still, through the window she smiled at him, a smile as wide and clean and bright white. Once when he slowly passed the doorway of the bakery while a lady, holding the string of a boxed pie, commented upon leaving on the beauty of the day, he heard her voice. "Yes," she said with a soft laugh, like a single note on a violin. It was the only word he had ever heard her utter, and it sounded as if she had an accent. The voice was soft but clipped, too deep to be kittenish but with a bit of a help-me hush. Eugene was so bewitched by her that he almost could not count his hands. He almost spoke to her that day, hesitated,

then did not, but as he left she smiled and held up her hand in a small wave. He did the same, thinking of Isaiah 49:15-16: *I will not forget. See, I have carved you in the palm of my hand.* She had emerald mirrors for eyes, and her skin, a soft beige, charmeuse, had a golden glow. She indeed reached to the rank of *étoile.* He found in her gaze an "anticipation light," the look of someone who wanted eagerly to share things, or so he hoped.

"Are you a fool?" Ratnaster squawked at Eugene who, without naming names, once—a rare thing—openly expressed that hope of her. "Humanity is a broken puppet! What, please, do you expect of her? Of anyone? Take any unselected group, anywhere. Not a Harvard reunion or a papal enclave or your three best friends. The group at *Quink* here. A bunch of people watching a fire! A corn-dodge gathering! Ditto-heads and fox-faces! It's depressing. We are fucking owls! People who walk in fogs are surprised to be seen in the daylight! Don't you see that? Just reach into the grain-bag any time you want and pick out a truthpop. The truth is, we're not beautiful. We're not very bright. We're not very articulate. I wrote a brilliant novel and what did I get? Sweet fucking fanny adams is what! I was sandbagged, but you know what I say? I say fuck agents! Fuck book pirates! Fuck your good and bad reviews! Fuck your awards! Fuck touring and signing books in bookstores! Fuck giving interviews! No, look around you. We're actually pathetic, standing about in our square hats and brown shoes with little round glass pieces in front of our eyes to see, ignoble, fart-small, depressed. Why does anybody want to see? Don't feel alone. It's all of humanity. Every inchling. We are sad failures! It is our inability to care that sustains us. Our personalities create an inferno for others and they seal us off in hells of our own. We bite at the carcass of history and tear away our feeble dreams in bloody chunks. Bernard Mandeville was correct. So was Thomas Hobbes. And Nicolo Machiavelli. There is no limit to the hyena in us. It is a miracle we are upright. Families betray each other. Gang up against each other and forming cadres 'struggle' one another." He swung up with terrifying heft that black mechanical hand and said, "I blame God."

But Eyestones loved Rapunzel. He was certain of it. He could not put her out of his mind. One night, coming out of the Boston Public Library and walking across the square, he thought he saw her pass through the lobby of the Copley Plaza in cream-colored Capri pants, a fingertip rose-violet jacket, and lovely black shoes, but as his heart

misgave and he tried dodging back to find her it all came to nothing. But shared secrets foster attraction, he believed. Had not experiments with couples proved it? He recalled once reading that in planned sociology games when teenage couples, previously strangers, were seated opposite each other, those asked to play footsie with each other grew closer than those who were told to avoid contact. There was a scent even when he stood in the bakery doorway in Rapunzel's presence. She always stood easily, swinging her skirt as she shifted from one foot to another revealing the firm curves of her thighs and hips under the woolen fabric. What was that scent, cherries? Peonies? Daffodils? Forest floor! It was redolent of what it meant to be within, deep within, a dark, magic muskwoods, Eyestones dreamed, with the odor of rare grasses, eucalyptus, wet earth, and that softgreenwarmspruceneedle scent! Parfumier, he thought, bottle that natural magic! It was the scent of all the glorious earth combined. *Forest floor!*

One Wednesday night, raining heavily, Eugene was playing music in comfort upstairs in his rooms after enjoying a delicious meal that Harriet Trombone had left on his doorstop with a note attached saying, "A bon voyage repast before you evacuate the country!"—she claimed it was leftovers, in order to avoiding losing face—of jerked drumettes and fried okra with mango relish. He roamed over his rack with twiddling fingers and picked out Irving Berlin's "Yankee Rose," Charles Melson's "What Do We Do on a Dew-Dew-Dewy Day," Art Jarrett's "Vilia," George Jessel singing "My Mother's Eyes," "Pilgrim's Blues," a foxtrot by the Isham Jones Orchestra on an old Brunswick label, "I Like Pie, I Like Cake, But I Like You Best of All" by Edwin J. McEnelly's Orchestra (Victor), Dubin's Dandies' "Hoodoo Voodoo Man," and Art Hickman's "Along the Way to Damascus." He also wanted to record for Duxbak, a co-religionist in collecting old 78s, an original Globe version of "Wondering" b/w "Oh Say! Can I See You Tonight?" by Mr. X and his Orchestra.

The telephone rang. It was Laura asking him to bring her bicycle over to her apartment, which, to save a ten-minute walk in the morning, she wanted to use to pedal from her flat up to the Central Square T station and back, taking the train to Boston every morning and back every night. A year or so before he had bought the bicycle for her at a yard sale, but she had left it sitting in his room next to piles of her books and other things she had left behind, along with running shoes, an iron, sweatshirts, boxes of records, a blue knapsack, some

old dumbbells for breast enhancement exercises, and other odds and ends. Eyestones never went to her flat anymore and privately vowed he would not, but he badly wanted to be rid of some of her things, as a way of being free of her.

Seeing Laura in her flat always had a devastating effect on him. The occasional glimpses he had of Micepockets were bad enough. She had relatively new roommates. Maudie, the big blonde, Eugene rarely saw, although Laura had often told Eugene of a married man she was seeing and of the nightly hiccupping sobs that she traced to a broken heart coming from her room. It was her guess, for apparently Maud did not confide in her enough for her to know, that she had been jilted. Wing was a quiet, darkly beautiful Chinese girl whose sharp slenderness seemed cut from ivory, with a level of grace that was almost royal. It seemed she was never there. He knew Laura was envious of her by the catty comments she made whenever her name came up. Eugene was especially of two minds about seeing Laura after a suitable absence. Lines of demarcation are easily drawn by such periods, and as he considered what he should do he felt enough negative effectiveness had registered simply to ignore her request.

In any case, he broke his resolution and carting the bike out awkwardly tied it into the trunk of his old car to take it to her. Just before he got into his car, a woman came scooting out into the driveway. It was Harriet Trombone, waving. "I saw some cracker walkin' by here earlier, white man. Looked suspicious to me. Mmmm, *mmm*, that ugly dude was lookin' for somethin'." "Maybe he was lost?" asked Eugene. "Peerin' in that window? More likely a homely, chicken-thievin', disease-ridden, get-your-white-asses-back-to-hell lyin' cheat out to do someone in this complex no good!" Eugene said he would keep a lookout and got into his car. "Hey, Skippy." "Yes?" asked Eugene, turning. "Where that Chink napalm at?" He laughed and headed off to River Street, first stopping off at a package store to buy for Laura a bottle of extra-dry sherry that he knew she liked. When he arrived, he parked on a side street closer to the back of the house and rang the bell on the front door and waited. *Keep door lachted.* As always, five minutes went by without anyone answering, as he took in the area of close, jammed-in houses and the boxed horrors of rundown mustard-and-war-colored walk-ups, occupied mostly by poor college students but a good many with section 8s, welfare families placed there by the government. One often heard screams in the neighborhood and bottles breaking

long into the night. After the sun went down, the neighborhood was even less safe. It could be a hassle even on "Tar Beach," when tenants on broiling summer days went up on the roof to tan and to listen to zydeco. The first and last time Eyestones went up there peeping-toms, drunks, and all sorts of maladjusted weirdoes came out of the woodwork and began yelling imprecations, possibly in indignation at Laura's furry Army-brown bathing suit! It was not his favorite area. Eugene checked his watch. He rang the bell once again. A misty rain began to fall, hazing the streetlights. It gave everything a soft bloom. But on River Street with its ruined and dilapidated look nothing ever seemed to improve in any way, and just as he was about to head back Laura suddenly appeared with the usual troubled face, the kind that never seemed to allay the anxiety it aroused.

"You're late," she said. He handed her the bottle of wine and said, "I was early someplace else." Laura was wearing a cranberry vest the size of a fretblanket and thrift-shop paisley pants six inches too high, revealing white socks and black shoes. He untied the bike and lifted it down. "I didn't think you were home," he said. Clumping down the back steps to unlock the back cellar door, she said, "I was in the bathroom, snipping my pubic hair." She lolled her tongue. "Shaving my landing strip."

He carried the bike into the mildewed basement of that Cambridge three-decker, coalyard damp and musty as a bat cave. She pulled the string on a bare bulb and as they stood in the rising odor of clammy washrags he could not help notice the streaks of early gray in her hair. With the rain beating down outside, matching temperature and dew-point had badly frizzed her hair. She asked him, "Can you stay?" He shook his head. "I can't," he replied. "Why is there always this trouble between you and I?" "You and me." There was distress in the way that she pulled at her sleeves. An exformative recklessness rose in her eyes. "Stay—for an hour?" He knew she did not love him and wanted to stave off the oppression of being alone. "Tell me a story," she said, pressing him. "I want to hear another story about Captain Glasspack and his Magic Mufflers." He only wanted to go home. He was thinking of Rapunzel. "Another time maybe," he replied and kissed her on the cheek. Then something took place that literally took his breath away. It took place in a moment, but it was truly terrifying, for in her fury while making knife-eyes at him she had the head-throw and wing-stretch—angry arms—of a loon. Laura screamed out loud, her

frothed tongue almost undulating, "*You've slept with girls you're not in love with, haven't you, haven't you, haven't you, haven't you*?" She just stood there, her fingers twitching. She kept standing and staring. Then she tucked her hair behind her ear, shrugged, and disappeared, stamping upstairs with that gait of hers, pliers, which gave her the indelible look of someone trying to keep her balance after having just dismounted from a horse. After peering down from her window to make sure Eyestones had gone—she spat contemptuously on the windowpane at him—she telephoned the Needles & Trax record shop for the sixth time since that night, and there was still no answer. There was never any answer.

She banged down the receiver, feeling monopolized by rejection and fell face-down on her mattress. The loon echo hung horribly in the air: *haven'tyouhaven'tyou*? a long E flat in the octave above middle C, a blues note, reverberating emptiness and loss. She brooded awhile, then dragged herself to the window where, looking dolefully down to the rain-washed street, she dreamt about tying her father down on bamboo and, while he kicked and screamed, cutting pieces out of his face. Unfaithfulness on several fronts and cruelty in many scenarios gave her the feeling of getting some of her own back. She stood up suddenly as if with resolution, picked up a spoon and, marching over to one of the heating pipes, banged three times with hard finality on one of them. The muffled noise of children sounded in the rooms below. Within minutes, a short, crippled creature, emerging from below like a kraken, having awkwardly stumped and bumped up the stairs on his dot-and-carry leg, stood in the shadowy room. It was her landlord, Micepockets. He peered through the darkness, calling Laura's name in loud, urgent whispers. It seemed she had vanished. Then she came out of the bathroom. A long silence. He began calling her in a moist whisper, "*Wlaura? Wlaura?*"

She was stark naked, completely blindfolded. Her pale unsavory skin revealed her rib cage and the bones of her flat buttocks, which strangely resembled shoulder blades, looked like broken joists. She resembled a whitened stick insect. He wiped his flat hair. Out of the blue she started revolving in circles, poodle-dancing in a kind of strange dervish of lust, swimming her sad stick-thin arms through the air. Her wishful makeup, tomahawk nose, and bony legs made her seem ludicrous in a seductive, defeated pavanne. On the wall the reproduction of a Joel Peter Witkin photograph of a dead fat man sitting in chair, headless, wearing only a pair of socks, hung not so much in ghastly

counterpoint as matching with macabre suitability her unprepossessing nakedness. Revealing her bare flesh, she was not Botticelli, Titian, or Cabanel—more like a figure out of a painting by Egon Schiele, shaped like a shoetree, size A.

"Who were you with?" he demanded. "Some man making wloud noises?" He looked ready to spring. "I wanna fuck your hair," he sex-grunted.

Laura leaned forward, blinded, smiling with Barbara Stanwyck's loose mouth. "*Eat me*," she ordered, briefly raising the black blindfold she wore and throwing a hump at him. A fretwork of shadows, an almost audible ungodliness in the rat-colored light, made the small crepuscular room even shabbier. This was only another dim café and Micepockets was just another scourer. He was blackly obsessed but had no idea in his bent, crippled passion what to do for this lewd and perverse tenant of his but threaten her as he had for almost a year with the blunt, sexual clubbings stolen from his wife, given to Laura, and confusing his desperate, urgent self, as always, as to whether it was a payment rendered or a collected fee. Laura and her crippled, unshaven slumlord each seemed to recognize in each other, as if with spots by maculate fish, that both of them had once been in mental institutions. He tore off his greasy grey pants, and in seconds two sweaty mandrills were bucking up and down on the shapeless mattress in a battle of savage minutes. The bedsprings groaned, as hugely grunting, he snuffled loudly and prodded, "Scream wloud! Scream *wloud!* Pain makes you beautifuwl!" He screamed all of a sudden and then splattered all over her as she howled like a Mohican into the walls of curling wallpaper and roundly cursed him as he rolled aside in a pile of twitches. After a moment, Micepockets sat up. He staggered nakedly over to the yellow wardrobe to rip open the new bottle of sherry he had seen there. He filled a smudged lip-printed kitchen glass to the brim and gulped half. She heard his speech defect again as he snuffed, "You need more wlicker."

"I know, I know, and I need to see a therapist," muttered Laura, rolling over and stanching her face in an old pillow. Micepockets sat by her, acrid with steam, and held out the glass; she regarded him with popped eyes, then gulped down the full contents and licked the rim with her badly smudged red lips and gave a libidinous smirk. She wabbled her tongue at him, suddenly screeching with laughter and fell back on the bed as once more he began pawing her with raw sweaty

hands and a trembling half-leg, and then, falling onto the mattress like hot gibbons as she licked his ears, they fucked again in an artillery of looniness and lust and the rising odor of sour milk.

XXII
Shenandoah

Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Rapunzel.

At work, high noon became a favorite time for Eugene Eyestones, except for Laura's daily black letter—now beginning to depress him—that was usually waiting for him in his mailbox. But it did not matter anymore, as Eugene, who was always given to dreaming of faraway exotic places like Shiloh and Sharon and Shinar and Shambhala, had something to look forward to now, and that was Rapunzel. Every morning now dawned as white as a new page for him. He went off to *Quink*, worked through the morning, and then it was time for lunch. He always took the alley behind his building at lunchtime when Rapunzel, magnificently, often took a walk during her lunch hour when, at a distinct distance, unnoticed, he just as often followed, his heart often tossing with jewels. There was a way she walked, a swishiness, with an exclusive and confidant stride. In the warm sunshine he could hear Helen Jepson on her old Red Seal recording of "Summertime." Was this the beautiful mythic maiden whom the Indians believed, creating it, shook corn out of her golden hair? She seemed to walk on music itself and in the lilt of the fresh open air, which seemed only to enhance her purity, appear even taller and more statuesque with her glistening sea-green eyes and wheatish shoulder-length hair that, having the delicate loft of expensive cashmere as it flowed in the breeze, seemed too silky for clips to hold fast.

Boston is lovely in autumn. How in New England the landscape was always changing in relation to the seasons! Every time one turned a corner a new perspective appeared. The weather only enhanced Rapunzel's beauty. On warmer days she wore lovely crisp blouses like spangled fritillaries with patterns of flowerets and fine dots and fanciful features. He watched her from a distance. Pampered skin, thin as buttermilk. Confident poised head, a perfect shape. She had the straight, forthright, honest face of Michelangelo's Medici Madonna, a symmetry evoking in him as much admiration as love and releasing oxytocin in his brain. Wasn't it a rush of oxytocin that filled his heart with hopeful love? That bonded mothers to newborns? That put hope in the soul and heat in the head? That lit the light of limerence? She was not merely clear, she was burnished. Her hair and golden skin caught the sun like metal. A star! Alnilam, the brightest in the Orion Nebula, the shiningest, youngest, closest, and most romantic nebula in the northern winter sky. Orion. Silver stars. Light. Taglioni's jewel casket! Joseph Cornell's box of light! A white bloom! Spaceflight beauty! Bright moonflower! Nothing was scripted, with her maplines based on a whim and wishet. Such radiance! Marvelous! Miraculous! *Mvrovolos!*

She wore filmy skirts. Her sexy walk, no matter how stiff or strong a dress she wore—only once in a while she wore jeans—had a sensuous but slight turbinoid undulation, which always caught the attention of various slouching jack-nasties nearby and crude jokey mechanomentalists working construction whenever she walked and wherever she went. Eyestones had the feeling that, rhythmically, at various moments, her pert lilting bottom, its sweet beckoning tortility, was temptation itself, a thought with its strong and attendant emotion that vaguely unsettled him and instilled a touch of the wistful. Exactly what is it about loveliness and beauty that so instills sadness in us? Its fragile perfection? Its delicate unattainability? Play a violin concerto and ask someone sometime what emotion is felt upon hearing it. "It is so beautiful," and he or she will invariably reply, "It's so sad." Was it sadness then that he felt, even some sad foreshadowing of his ensorcelled self? When he was younger Eugene would sometimes notice a girl with a certain lovely medallion of face on a bus or a train or at an airport and think instantly, thrilled, hearing sleighbells, *I would marry you at the very next station!* and at that very moment in the fullness of his dreams believe not only in their legitimacy of that thought but that by the merest microsurgical changes in fate—why not?—they could be realized! The

interiorization of it! Psychic transcendentalism!

He had the dreamer's soaring imagination, and often he fell into what the French refer to as a *fleur bleue*, the kind of adolescent crush involving loss of appetite, idiotic distraction, the wayward confusion of love. What was behind such facile foolery? Don't we often fall in love with our own selves idealized? A double delivered out of a dream! Isn't a large part of the dream the mirage that by ourselves we might make happen whatever we wish?

Much of that had changed. It was like Eyestones to be distant now. The ideal was so intimidating. Our dreams! The ideal! How passing strange that something could so compel us and yet keep us from the very fact of attaining it—*while* it also disallowed settling for anything less! He came to feel that the quickest way to destroy a dream was to test it in reality. It was not a concept born of fear, he would have insisted on saying if he thought someone would believe him, but rather of hope. Could that be why he kept Rapunzel at bay? It was strange. The nymph ideal. *Amor de lonh*. Mallarmé's *l'absence*, the state in which one positively did not want his ideal to be present. Nerval said, *Les bêtes s'aiment de pres, les esprits s'aiment de loin*. It was the war that taught him that, as well. A likelihood is best measured by the number of people that suffer in it, and in his life as in his loves he had seen the play of chance too often in much that he had planned, too often seen the pointlessness of yearning for what indeed never took place and most of the time never could.

Trying to be objective and never unaware that all quests are ultimately quixotic, especially in the investigation of love, Eyestones who generally refused to have revelations—never marrying, although he had never planned not to do so, was a major way of avoiding them, from what he observed—now found himself alert to the possibilities of a kind never expected before. Now he cared about someone. His soul had picked her out, in flashes, as glass does color. A long-awaited change had suddenly transfigured him. How different he felt compared to those days in winter when he had walked these lines watching the red-wing blackbirds come in early March.

On Sundays, Rapunzel wore a lot of tasteful but understated tones, light dubonnet, mauve, pretty bolero jackets of velvety material with cuffs often lacy and fragile-looking, delicately printed chiffons in which she walked, *endimanché*, the scent of lilacs threading the air all about her with its heady fragrance, a watercolor come alive. She loved fashion.

It seemed that nobody could love it more. There was something in the way she walked that to Eyestones was almost disturbing in her satisfaction of it alone, a fatal pitch of superiority, a fluid temptation—or was this simply the confession of his own obsession?—into which it seemed everything and everybody could be swept away. Love conceived as a ritual, while it works to make the power of passion sovereign, nevertheless captures reason in the kind of lucid discomfort we sadly yearn for even as we feel the pull of the voluptuous threaten us. She was so beautiful. She positively shone. People who know the mountains have a name for the radiance she gave off: alpenglow. How straight she held herself, her regal stature collimating to her beauty in a perfect match. There seemed to be an abstract elegance to her back alone, its angle, so singular to her entire form. The allure of the female back, so often ignored. Any real celebrity can always be recognized from the back. Am I a dorsalist? he wondered. She stood out so vividly. Above all, she stood out because he loved her. What he loved, emerged, never not to be known. It was a truism, really. What he sought, he somehow always saw. It was no surprise, for Eyestones, who upon seeing her always felt like a Sufi springing around on one toe, had out of love memorized her every look, her every gesture, her every move. *Say lovely dream, where coulds't thou find shades to counterfeit that face?* he asked with Beaumont. *Colours of this glorious kind come not from any mortal place.*

She bought lozenges at a CVS. Through an iron-meshed schoolyard fence she once tickled a dog. She ate salads at a stall, standing up in the Quincy Market, and often scanned the Ticketron kiosk next to Faneuil Hall, reading the notices. A red-gold vest she often wore with what looked like patterns of rosemaling work made him believe that she might not be American. It was a challenge every day to try to discern who and what and all she was. One afternoon, wearing an April-lovely shirtwaist with a sailor collar, she sat for a while on a granite seat in Parkman Place facing Tremont Street; she watched pigeons but seemed to look beyond them into the middle distance. She had a pout, *la moue à la Brigitte Bardot.* Her contemplative staring figure, as if looking into the heart of a dream, gave Eugene by a subtle act of a borrowed or adopted apocalypse the privilege, at least in his own teeming mind, of becoming himself the very figure she studied, for well he knew that no creation on earth has more substance than the insubstantial dream. He sat there quietly, often daily, like Patience on a monument, watching her in the way of a museum-goer; it was as if for him that Rapun-

zel in a mythic way on a high position à la Memling sat on a block of amethyst protected by the two lions of virginity and purity. If dissection is revenge, Eyestones wondered, then does not love involve simple acceptance? In a wholesale way? Wasn't it William Blake who told us that "the springs of pure delight can never be defiled"? Aren't we ourselves always impressed with that which we don't understand, but, if that someone or something is human, feel we remotely know? Become full believers in what we somehow experience, as in, say, feeling a wind we can not see but feel the powerful effects of? By what mode—hoax or hybrid hope or transfiguration?—do we turn to what we need to see in order to be? Once or twice Rapunzel fed the birds stale bread from a bag she had brought along. He felt it was sad in a way, as she walked so distinguishedly along among other lovely women, even among the big floral displays and iridescent flowerbeds of the Public Garden, that her finer qualities did not noticeably prevail, at least in the way he yearned for her to be recognized, over the next less fine and that the *vertu* of her beauty was so let down by the workaday world.

He could not help but compare Rapunzel with that new-penny glint in her hair as in her fashion jackets she walked or knelt, in her body-postures, her angles, her phrasing, in that wayward and beguiling autonomy of stately positions he could not help but study and which seemed almost the very source of poetry—*O fons Bandusiae!*—with the starkly contrasting black-and-white images repeating in his head of bony Laura Warholic as a teenager sitting with a spoon eating from a bowl of FrankenBerry cereal or watching TV upside down in front of a sofa or shouting around her neighborhood in foxed and discolored jeans which of course he knew was unfair to her.

It had been on another day on a warm noontime the previous August that for a change Eyestones had not missed his chance, when again he had seen Rapunzel sitting on her granite seat, wearing a blue panne-velvet bolero jacket with a black ribbon tie of lace, of trying to take her photograph. She was abstractly looking away—where?—with a half-turn of her lovely face in an exquisite *contrapposto*. A breeze ruffled her soft hair. She turned her head in his direction with an ethereal ease, almost indolence, as though a mild lifting wind had gently swiveled it. When that happened and her strenuous loveliness was revealed, his heart was water, and the suddenness of it made him whisper for payment in full by a kiss:

"Give me a Yankee dime
A Yankee dime
A Yankee dime. . . ."

It brought back a memory of an exquisite moment he had when he was a little boy somewhere, in a store, over a radio, he couldn't say where, of first hearing Gustave Holst's "Jupiter" from *The Planets* and so overcome was he by the incandescence of the melody that he actually started to cry it was so richly, so heart-crackling beautiful. Was it only that he was so young? Was it a glimpse of perfection? Why strangely did beauty make him sad?

What, he wondered, did someone see whose beauty so essentialized her? Whose luxe and swank and lambency shone? Whose glorious pylons and colonnades lifted so inscrutably out of our own grey deserts? Was it not true that a view looked astonishingly different from what it would otherwise be, and infinitely more beautiful, if framed by a window of splendid form and unusual shape and singular elegance? He had a camera; it was Duxbak's. He had asked to borrow Mutrux's camera, but believing that he was going to photograph Laura, Mutrux conveniently forgot to leave it for him. Eugene would remember the day well, for while he remained at a distance setting up the shot, who came energetically bounding down a walkway on his way to the Park Street Station but Mickey "Mouse" Mewlingshaw, and Eugene thought *Oh good God, no!* "I just sent off a letter to Prince Rainier, asking if I could personally visit him," crowed Mewlingshaw under his mop of skunky white hair. "Hey, I figured, what the shit, it couldn't hurt," he crowed. Eugene waited until he left and then after careful deliberation and patience took the photo. It developed beautifully. It was this picture that he kept in his office to ponder paradise.

Strangely, however, nothing in that photo or in real life in fact could easily be read into Rapunzel's rare face. It was protean in power, changeably, eternally real at one time, inviting an eroticism it then suddenly seemed to confiscate with a shifting malleability in a single look—and yet this one distant—that took on the lineaments of an ethereal dream. Yes, I won't, laughed Eyestones, no, I will. But was not the unbeliever's lack of faith as impenetrable as the believer's faith? *Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amor.* Which of the two am I living for, wondered Eugene. Or are they both the same? There walks mysterious Yvonne de Galais, and she would know. I wander the lost domain. *Le grand meaulnes.* "A

day as fixed and beautiful as my death day."

More than any other season, autumn seemed to affect her moods, for often she sat and simply stared sitting by the large fountain in the Common, motionless in thought, simply standing up after a while the way a ballerina does, as if gently lifted by a current of air and walking away. Always attracted to heights and low lonely places and the likelihood of getting lost, Eyestones recalled once feeling as he imagined that she now felt, climbing the Catalina Mountains outside Tucson where the real endurance test after the initial climb was to traverse the entire range, which took three days. He commiserated whenever he sensed—how, he could not say—Rapunzel's sadness, but he could do nothing, of course, but sit on the grass at a discreet if fervent remove and hug his knees. Was fate somehow infectious? he wondered. Can proximity somehow cast a pall? Had he by his ardor or some act of proximate transferal given Rapunzel Laura's chronic and lonely emptiness? Did women perhaps share one melancholy? He could not quite fathom that, finally, he was going to act. That afternoon, with an intention to cheer her up, he ran over to Quincy Market to buy Rapunzel a slim white rose, a Stanwell Perpetual, but when he got back she was gone. She had disappeared. So with a smile, he gave the rose to two passing nuns and walked dolefully back to work.

It was one of those perfect crisp fall days, when rust-red and golden-dusted leaves, some turquoise, kissed by the autumn sunlight, the colors of Tiepolo's eighteenth-century vaulted ceilings, floated from the trees, that he realized in a heart grown heavy as crayonstone how much he loved her, adored her, a red-letter day memorable for being the closest Eyestones ever came to introducing himself to her. A blueberry sky. Dinosaur clouds. Fluffy cumulus floaters. The leaves fell to the Andante Cantabile of Tchaikovsky. She was wearing full Thai trousers of silk, purple-black, with a cerise box-jacket, like an immaculate houseboy's, buttoned to her throat yet molding every curve of her slender breast, waist, and hips. She turned and the back of her white neck seemed especially the secret of resourcefulness, strength, and seductiveness. Seeing her he thought of one word: *Shenandoah*, which in the language of the Delaware Indians meant "daughter of the stars." She *was* a star. Eyestones in the sun of that unmistakable afternoon felt almost drunk on the gorgeous fleeting infinity of being near her as she walked through the dark November colors. Clouds airy and chaste of fat scudded snow-white like meringue through the sky. He often

heard music when he was near her. This time it was the sweet, plaintive strain of Fauré's "Pelléus and Mélisande" while he watched as with fingers sticky from the sun she ate what seemed something floral from a yellow cachepot she had brought with her and that now sat in her golden lap. How the hot sunlight caught and seemed to bind in her hair! May you, my golden digitalis, touch me with your ten thousand fingers! If she was now beautiful in autumn, golden as malt, gorgeous in all the riotous colors but bundled up, how breathtaking—O Jubilee! the horn that is blown!—to see her in summer, in the bone-warming inertial heat, in the fullness of her fleshy replicative beauty, in cradling warmth, among the solsticial flowers, when the corn-flags, fraxinella, martagon pinks, and dark-leaved orange lilies, black-flecked, began to blow and she went coatless!

As he watched her walk, Eyestones heard in his heart the first of Chopin's two concertos, no. 1 in E minor, the composer's tribute to the hopeless love he felt for a particular beauty to whom he himself never dared speak. All he knew was that one's eternal fate is hidden in this life, Eyestones realized, all one can do is search for providential signs of it. What was happening to him? Was it healthy? Was his penchant to see this intriguing woman merely an attempt to repair some unhappy reality of his past? Fill a missing piece? Was it not true that when watching becomes a substitute for meeting—never mind physical warmth—it acquires a pathological edge? Was his compulsion just spectator-gratification taking hold by fixing on anonymous girls he noticed in the street?

Under a sky of muddy lutulence one raw noontime, spitting drops, her light shone. It began to pour. Rapunzel in a yellow slicker and holding a blue umbrella, walking in the rain, created a field of white diamonds, glittering, as she splashed through puddles as if through jewels. The dark sky and growing cloud deck by way of background only enhanced her looks. Eyestones smiled and, pondering the ten possible kisses listed in the *Kamasutra*, delighted in choosing for themselves, he and her, the symbolic kiss bestowed on a woman's reflection in the water! She waited through the downpour under the old bandstand and then left, going hillward in the honey rain, while by a distant tree, watching her, he quoted—and personalized—Elizabethan poet Thomas Lodge:

"I would in rich and golden-colored rain

With tempting showers in pleasant sort descend
Into fair Rapunzel's lap, my lovely friend,
When sleep her sense with slumber doth restrain."

When Rapunzel walked, Eyestones always followed her at a careful distance. There was so much to see, to discover, and in the wishes of his heart no day somehow ever repeated itself. She loved colors. If it was not a festuca-colored jacket she wore and a short parasol-yellow skirt showing her long legs, she would be sporting a cap mottled red-and-yellow like a Caribia rose. She often wore jewelry, a small ring, a bracelet, a silver necklace that added light to her face. Once she stopped before the front-window of M. Steinert's shop on Boylston Street to admire a piano. He had seen from long and studied observation that her fingers were long and tapered. Did she play? Did she appreciate music? Would she listen to his old records with him? Be patient with his stories? Cradle his head before a fire? How different she seemed from other women. So unique! So unlike the drones at the office whom Chasuble so cruelly dismissed, such as Ann Marie Tubb ("A two-ton Cuisinart exuding only egg-whites!") and The Krauthammer ("She looks like Vivian Vance!") and even Laura ("A *Nutcracker* without the ballet!"). As the weather got colder, snow turned silver on her coat. Rapunzel seemed to shine in a Moorish *drap d'or* crimson scarf with frills of gold, green, and crimson. The grey overcast afternoons and chill dampness brought her inside. One afternoon she entered the Copley Plaza lounge, had a drink, and sat there writing out what from afar looked like figures, numbers, maybe an accountancy list. When she left, Eugene unobtrusively walked over—no one in love can avoid being a moron—and dared to ask the bartender what she had ordered: an Absolut and cranberry with a half-lime and a dash of pomegranate juice. It was quite amazing to see the bakery girl in such a rare morph, having a drink in such a place, smoothing her Chanel skirt, fielding even as she sat there two calls on her cell phone. "Will you marry me?" asked all of the ten perfectly dressed gentlemen in the lounge, or so Eyestones imagined.

Occasionally she who had become for him one of the two or three instances in his life that were irrefutable proof that being alive was worth it would head down to Filene's Basement, incongruously it seemed, although it was clear by now that she came from wealth, if she did not have it herself. He watched as she shopped to see if she were an

exponent of self-indulgence in any way and, if so, to try to determine if such a thing might affect his attitude. Her features were elegant, but her expression as she considered clothes seemed guarded, as if she did not wholly trust whatever she handled or held up. She tried on shoes and coats and looked at lingerie. A plain cashmere scarf looked stunning on her. A wide, purple-blue crêpe-crinkle skirt with an elasticized drawstring waist that she tried on enhanced her lovely curves so well that Eugene was almost swept away in a frenzy of desire. One time he actually dared to walk by her and in a heady split-second of a moment in which his heart almost moxibusted with love he caught the scent of her perfume, which was a sharp shock of Nile blue that softened into a caressing magenta note. It was almost symphonic. Next to her, Laura was as common as grass. Rapunzel would often spend an hour trying on hats with great care. Obstinate statue, he apostrophized, do not avert your eyes or cover your head! Incandescent girl, spotlit-white in any crowd by my honest desire, the signaling chimes of my love make anything you wear or want to wear impeccable! When a few times in the crowded aisles of the crowded store she went fluffing through the wooden bins filled with piles of colored silk and satin panties, dexterously selecting a favorite and carefully fingering the nap of each, Eyestones was almost transported. Was not a woman's refinement always revealed in the fingers?

Rapunzel purchased at different times on different afternoons a coconut-fiber rug, a tortoiseshell comb, pieces of sheet music, perfume (Joy by Patou), tuberoses, two wide hats, occasionally a book (art- or dance-related), a spiral notebook, a piece of conch jewelry, countless panties, Pratesi sheets, a teak salad bowl, a vintage bag, a bottle of Svedka vodka, some Latino CDs, an expensive espresso machine, a jumper with cartoon ocean stripes, a plain cashmere scarf, and an expensive potted lily in a wide golden pot.

What a biographer he had become! He prayed that such a pursuit of her was normal. Orthodoxy was the grave of intelligence, wasn't it? Perception was never impartial, was it? Especially in someone so myopically challenged? To relax, he cupped his closed eyes for a minute, palming them. Wasn't it an idea of Plato's that the lover has more virtue than the loved one? Was therefore some imbalance necessary for that virtue to exist, for that person to grow? he wondered, who understood that in all intimate relations one partner almost always thrives at the expense of the other, which gave Henry James his themes, did it

not? It applied to him and to Laura, he knew, but what about Rapunzel? For being her *trouvère*, her *pursuivant*, her esquire, he couldn't say. To know! To see! To feel! To understand! I feel the thrill a biographer feels, thought Eugene. A book that will never be published. Who was it who said that love ceases to be pleasure when it ceases to be a secret?

Orion! Vast belt-star in my constellation, high above, he prayed, middle one so misty, so mysterious, so brightly misty, he prayed, O Rapunzel, love me.

Eugene ate lunch quickly, almost always after returning from his walk, daydreaming of Rapunzel usually in some peek-a-boo sweater or low-cut blouse of imminent but never quite realized immodesty. Sometimes it was an exceptional lunch that Harriet Trombone gave him, like a flying fish sandwich, when he would take his time. At work Little Bob Merkle, with entrepreneurial hustle, rushed about like a poodle selling sandwiches for $5.00 each, which the previous night at home he had stayed up to make, hoping to turn a penny—and held it against Eyestones that he was not a customer. And why that frown after lunch today? Another one of Laura's letters, which in these last months he had begun to leave in a pile unopened, was lying on his desk. Some of them he just threw away. What was worse, he repeatedly asked himself, getting these letters or finding her standing there in front of him, thin as thread, in her deconstructed clothes and dung-brown Ophelia hair? Whereas at the beginning of his relationship with Laura, volcanic aeons ago, his desire to please her actually empowered her to be indifferent, now his pity and standoffishness, a coldness he could not help, often incited her anger. It was her custom now to write letters to him. By way of forewarning, because she had become suspicious, she habitually started writing, having to write, on the outside of envelopes, "A nice letter," "Only loving thoughts," "This one's not mean," etc. It was those very ones he got rid of the fastest.

One afternoon Warholic stopped by Eugene's office and without any preface insisted that after work they meet for drinks at Welfare's. When Eugene found him in a back booth, nursing a black beer, Warholic with derisive eyes smugly shoved in his direction a pile of letters from Laura, miraculously still unopened, and said, "This unstable bitch has been planting notes about me in houses all along my street. 'Papering the neighborhood,' they call it. *Kucker!*" he spat. "*Shtik drek! Se shtinkt!*" "I'm sorry to hear it," said Eugene. Warholic whooshed. "Me, too." Eugene asked, "Can you help her?" "Me help? When these

letters are for you?" Warholic stared almost in disbelief and screamed, "I'm suing the bitch!" and on the way out slammed an empty beer glass onto the Bechstein piano before he kicked it. What was Laura writing to him for? He decided he would not read them. Then he did. Her letters over the weeks got crazier and crazier. Each epistolatrix was another personality. Cruelty. Broom-riding threats. Twaddle. Chastened humility. Even groveling. "I told you, never make eye-contact with a baboon," Warholic had repeatedly warned him, wagging that oversized head of his with the long quadratic skull of a northeast Maine coon. "The woman's a wacko. The wheel's spinning, but the hamster's asleep! I tell you, it's either fight or flight."

Eugene wished it *were* flight. Was she in fact a "multiple" with three or four alters? Co-morbid? A naughty/nice split? A psychotic geodesic dome? Or was she simply a hysteria virtuoso, despondently retailing the sexual escapades of her father under the banner of being shocked, as Mutrux alleged, but finding them luridly intriguing? Dramatically trotting out those flatted seventh notes of the blues for sympathy? Or was she yearning to become a girl-child once again, trying to trade the many unwanted burdens of self-knowledge and moral responsibility for the comfort of cotton panties and jump-rope songs? She herself positively adored psychospeak. It was astonishing to find the word *inappropriate* always on her lips, whenever, that is, she was not fellating a perfect stranger. "I was bathed as a little girl in a way that felt intrusive to me," "His touch was inappropriate," "The way he came near me was uncomfortable," etc. She needed such words. A self-mapper, she was a big advocate of what is known as RM (Recovered Memory), to Generation Xers what pullups and pushups were to Nazi Youth.

But while what corroborates an emotion often drains it, fate operates laterally, and as Laura centralized every day by almost every act exactly what he did not want, he came to know by algorithms—and not without comfort—what he did. It was lovely Rapunzel. The dreams she incubated brought to life in his heart newer and newer resolves. She walked among gilded silver favrile, glass of gold, silver blue! Wasn't it all miraculous? he thought, feeling so long deprived of love. Wake up, nowness! My soul sings in light and soars! Full flight! Contrails of dreams! Anamorphic perspectives! I open my eyes, and my eyes are filled. With joy in his heart he followed her figuratively just as he did literally. There was magic. There were mysteries. He welcomed, he watched, he listened to those mysteries, for mysteries

abhor an unbelieving man. It turned out that she was Swedish. Earlier in the week Rapunzel had stopped in the lobby at the Parker House and bought a copy of *Svenska Dagbladet*. The way that Eugene discovered this was that, pausing for a suitable interval after she had bought the paper, he simply walked over to the news-vendor and inquired what newspaper that beautiful woman—he pointed—had just bought. He could not even pronounce the refaned headlines and umlauted, ångström-hatted words in the large foreign paper that the vendor held up and that he purchased to peruse, alas, however, in vain. That very same week he bought a Swedish dictionary and proceeded to learn the meaning of such words as *rökhal, bageri, skönhet, oläkug,* and *hjert-frätande*, not that he could read the several sheets of scribbled notes, something about dishonor, that she at another time had crumpled and thrown away in the Copley Plaza lounge, her favorite lunch-spot, he came to see, and that he in his lovesickness had retrieved—and adored, and saved—only to have a sample of her graceful handwriting: Carolingian minuscule with neat, uncluttered legibility in an ink color best described as celadon.

At one lunch hour on a windy November day, Rapunzel typically walked over by the Boston Common but then seemed to linger—it was at one such time he thought with a sinking heart that she might be meeting a man, although it was intriguing that she never did—appearing inexplicably distracted. She turned and began walking back only to sit down, as if brooding, on a bench in Parkman Plaza. She checked her watch and then got up and walked over to Essex Street, as she had done several times before, in the direction of the shabby, down-at-the heels Combat Zone. He wondered why. It was odd in that, naked of any hat or handkerchief, she moved less with determination than with a certain hard fury, a determined gait, as though whatever she needed to say could not be spoken but only marched down in some kind of hunt. All of a sudden, with some panic, he realized he could no longer find her. He assumed that she had disappeared into a building but with his bad eyesight he had lost her and could not be sure where. He went into a coffee shop, bought a box of Good & Plentys and a magazine, and with an emotional suspense that evoked in subtle ways the apprehension he had always felt in Vietnam setting down a YP19 in a clearing for hasty evacuations under fire, waited until after an hour had passed he had to go, overcome with, in a sense deafened by, the kind of unease, of apprehension, of dread, that often characterizes

an encounter with the sacred—or profane—while, still, love with all its tributary patience welled up in him. Moist armpits. Cold stomach. Ears full of tense silence. He was baking with longing. Yeast consumes oxygen. It was as if a person were sitting behind him in a dreamscape whom, no matter how hard he tried, no matter how intensely he wished, he could not see, in spite of an unsettling incandescence, sunlight and sylvanshine flooding him all at once. Was she real? Did not William James assure us that whatever excites and stimulates an interest is real? Mystery reconciles much faith, he thought, but then wondered *what am I doing here and why?* It was suddenly borne in on him not without some terror that he might have borrowed this intimacy issue from Laura only to feel it for Rapunzel *doré* with her hair as golden and heavy as French ivory, a being whose central light as if from a monstrance, bathing her in photons, blinded him in its overpowering whiteness. It bothered him that a contrast could become a contract. For no particular reason he recalled in his unease the scene between Greta Garbo and Ramon Novarro in the movie *Mata Hari*. "There is so much light in here," says the beautiful and enchanting spy, pointing to a candle. "Put that one out, too." "The Madonna Lamp?" asks her lover Alexis somewhat shocked, even scandalized by her profane request. "Yes," says Mata Hari, challenging him. "I can't do that," he tentatively replies. "You said I came first," declares Mata Hari, testing the limits of his love. Getting up wearily, Eyestones walked back to work, preoccupied, fearful, feeling, as sanctuary withheld itself, that the widest and deepest and most fulfilling emotions of love could be had, as often proved to be the case, only by intensifying ordeal.

XXIII
Two for Chinese

One rainy, windy night, Eyestones and Duxbak were having dinner together at a small table in the downstairs dark lower room of the Ho Yuen Ting restaurant on Hudson Street in Boston. Cold had settled hard into the city, and the wind was whipping. The flag on top of South Station was straight out. It was their usual senatusconsultum, where, eating steaming plates of Lo Mein (Eyestones) and General Gau's Chicken with Broccoli (Duxbak) and, talking quietly, chopsticks clacking, they found as usual that they had barely touched on the many subjects they had wanted to discuss. There were silences. They had earlier gone to see the old Burgess Meredith film *Winterset* at a small movie house nearby and all that rain and the Thirties hats and the beauty of that dark, intriguing woman—"Say, what ever happened to that lovely actress, Margo?" Duxbak had asked him as they walked out—had deeply moved Eugene, but when in the film the old hurdy-gurdy began to play "Siboney," his heart had filled to overflowing and he found he had tears in his eyes.

"Good food, isn't it?" asked Eugene. "First-rate," said Duxbak ringingly, smiling from that heart so solid, those standards so disinterested, that faith so strong. "I've always insisted that there is no such thing as a great restaurant, only great dishes. Do you agree?" Duxbak did agree, emphatically, and poured more tea into their cups. He had said grace, but it was always that way with him, for with his doxological enthusi-

asm he assigned everything to the benevolent heavens with the simple and joyful conviction that by such faith all the inestimable necessities of his life were met and more than met with grace. With his shirt tightly buttoned up to the top, Duxbak's face shone brighter than ever, although, perspiring into his shirt collar as he ate, he was aware that his friend was preoccupied. Returning Duxbak's old Nikon F that he had lent him to take his pictures, and mindful of why, Eugene Eyestones with some weariness, perhaps because the wistful mood of the movie still left a vacancy in him, felt certain changes coming in his life. He had only hinted at what, somewhat diffidently, he hesitated to disclose. He had avoided mentioning Rapunzel and merely confided to his old friend that in the light of Warholic's recent insulting complaints about the controversial essay he had written that he had been considering for some time quitting *Quink*.

Duxbak listened. His thin hair was messed like wet feathers, and as he sat there, thoughtfully, his feet in bump-toed shoes planted side by side, he only knew he wanted to help. His tie was a somber moire, such as an old man might wear. In a corner stood his umbrella, furled but bulbously. He ate busily and hardly spoke, waiting as he was for his friend to do so. But after awhile it seemed they were getting nowhere.

"I liked those essays, E^2—every issue. Everybody was upset, I gather, because both sexes are threatened in it. Don't you think perhaps people assumed, when by implying, you know, the more one is in nature, the less one is an artist, that you were restating to a degree Einstein's controversial comment, 'Marriage is dangerous—it is the unsuccessful attempt to make something lasting out of an incident'?" He had in his speech the soft delicate tones of a museum docent. "It is an important job you do, Eyestones. When I graduated from college, I won a copy with gilt pages of Matthew Arnold's essays. He once wrote, 'Morality is three-quarters of life, and sex is one-half of morality.'"

"I was hoping it wouldn't sound so androcentric," said Eugene, "but unfortunately it did. You know? I was trying to show that the female not only typifies the race, but, metaphor aside, she *is* the race, its enduring and magnificent totem. Look at that mural," he said, nodding to a wall painting in the restaurant of a group of mandarins among flaming peacocks. "The normal color of birds is that of the young and the female, according to Lester Ward in *Pure Sociology*, and the color of the male is the result of his excessive variability. Females do not vary in this wayward way. They represent in a sense the center of gravity of,

of," he leaned forward, "of the biological system. They are that 'stubborn power of permanence' of which Goethe speaks, which is why it is often repeated that the female represents heredity and the male variation. Looking at it in a strange sort of catagenic way, Duxbak, you could even argue that the male, given the set of compresent events, has no biological purpose other than procreation, after which act, in the light of nature, he can expire without accomplishing anything else, no? That is why in this world there are so many indiscriminate men pursuing so many discriminate women. We men are a useless surplus." He laughed and tapped his temple. "Aren't all the purposes of useless surpluses especially superfluous?"

Duxbak burst out laughing and looked up with his Hallowe'en pumpkin smile and said, "Like slurping porpoises, or do you mean burping corpuses?"

He poured more tea into the small white cups and raising his own toasted, "May the best day of your past be the worst day of your future." Eyestones clicked cups. "And—"

Eugene was ready for it.

"The egrets have appeared in Methuen."

"I've always thought that the male's comparatively more brilliant attire and dazzle—nothing but a vain display of eccentric parts, senseless outlay, mere feathers, so to speak—actually leaks into his art in a sort of chromatic transferal by which, fighting nature, struggling to give birth himself, he creates in order to *be*, makes in order to *mean*, drawing himself into the center of the confrontation he has to face with himself unless he simply refuses to exist. What else is the lesson of the mallard? The peacock? The painted bunting, black, red, green, and yellow next to the indigo bunting?"

"True. But people nowadays intentionally choose to misunderstand when anyone talks about things like biology, races, and men and women. Ours is an age of eunuchry. Television, the Internet, only another form of TV, really, personal computers. Dot-commers. Everything communal. Everyone needing to be instantly in touch. Those portable *telephones?* Don't the new ones have clocks, do print-outs, keep lists, send out mail, record music, play songs, let you watch a movie while making a movie, connect you to interconference calls, and do everything but draw your bathwater? So much for Walden Pond. As T.S. Eliot asks, 'Where is the life we have lost in living?' Who pauses to *think* today? I don't believe that meditation is of consequence any-

more. People spend all their time trying to come up with schemes, not ideas—plans to get rich, not ideas to ponder. Quick cash. The old do-re-mi. Shinplasters. With our universal linkups we seek only to multiply consent. From the computer to the bank from the bank to the computer. Forth and back, forth and back. It is a sentimental religion today to stay ignorant. There is no dialogue between the sexes today, only two monologues."

"And hostile ones," said Eugene.

"Even incomprehensible."

"Right."

They both stopped eating. Rain beat on the windows. Duxbak looked at his good friend, his hands folding in momentary alliance, and said to him, "Selfishness is all our agony. Didn't the Gospel tell us a grain of wheat must fall onto the ground and die, otherwise it remains alone?" He blinked, looking sad. "But if it dies it brings much fruit.

"Look around our office, a metonym for the world. Can you name anyone who is not disgruntled about something? Poor Ratnaster with his liverish misanthropy, Mutrux, Ann Marie Tubb and The Krauthammer, Spalatin, Gnorm who rudely and openly calls you 'Aquarium Eyes,' the San Diegos, and Warholic, the dramatic chromatoforce of whose temper virtually alters the color of his face's personalities. Then there is our friend, the handsome roisterer-at-large, Discknickers. What do they call him around the office—*Der Schwarze Adler*?"

Eyestones smirked and making devil horns intoned with comic warning, "'Forked Ascenders!'"

"I must say, I worry about that young man. I notice that with me he is always available for"—Duxbak cleared his throat and fiddled with the grosgrain cord of his eyeglasses— "short, therapeutic interrogations on just about everything from, well, my use or overuse of paper to postage stamps to my purchases of envelopes. Still, I don't want to say anything bad about him. It is as great an error to speak well of a worthless fellow as to speak ill of a good one. But there, look, I just did bad-mouth him. And his interrogations."

"To notice—the Accountant's Syndrome! When that notorious essay of mine was published, Discknickers thoughtfully stopped into my office with the seriousness of a gravedigger to tell me that I had forgotten to include the fact that women as a gender were also never once mentioned at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., except, notably, for the one canon about 'women living with priests.'" Eyestones laughed.

He gestured with a knife to Duxbak's dinner of chicken. "I once witnessed the Black Eagle at a table in the middle of a public restaurant, and not without my feeling mortified, believe me, intolerably denounce Warholic in ringing tones and a more than casual lack of facial grace for ordering a porterhouse steak, pompously iterating with closed eyes about a fiat on which he claimed to have privileged knowledge that all Jews, both observant and unobservant, are Scripturally prohibited from eating the hindquarters of an animal—which includes New York strip steak, T-bone, filet mignon, and, yes, you guessed it, porterhouse. 'Eat mush steak!' he barked. A horrendous scene. I thought that Warholic was going to strangle on his tongue. A natural-born wind-artist. The irony is that Discknickers, I've heard, has once or twice given exclusive dinners serving, according to rumor, steak à la Lautrec where you grill three of them, one stacked top of the other, on a fire made of grapeweed copiously covered with pepper and mustard, where you decadently serve only the one in the *middle* which is supposedly the only one of the steaks which is cooked perfectly. The others? Do apparently what the little French painter did. Give them to the help!"

Duxbak sadly shook his head. "Our group is the world, including me." Duxbak took a sip of his tea. "I'm perfectly sanguine that they do not look with favor on me. I know some of things they say about me, my being unmarried and all, my odd habits, I suppose. I'm a zero to them. I am dry and dull." He leaned forward. "In German *ritz* means crack. Warholic is married, or was. Didn't he—" Duxbak looked up—"um, 'step aside,' as the old novels use to phrase it? You know what I mean." He smiled sadly.

Eyestones said, "See other women, yes."

"I treat Chasuble decently, as I try to treat everybody, Eugene, and Mutrux, whenever he sees me merely talking to him, constantly makes vicious remarks about . . . well, about me being in *el otro campo.* It is beyond me, friend. Facts for some reason seem to make no difference to him."

"Things happened to him in San Francisco."

"He hates the place."

"And all it stands for."

"Or does not."

"What's ironic about that," said Eyestones, sitting forward, "is that homosexuality hundreds of years ago posed far less a threat to macho identity than heterosexuality did, an actual inversion of our current

social belief. That is why the Elizabethan theater had not the slightest qualms about using young boys in the roles of women. But it was not because dressing up was considered effeminate. Want to know why? The social fear back then was the opposite! It was a Renaissance belief that males tended to be effeminized by their emasculating desire *for* women. Amazing, isn't it? An intense love for beauty, they felt, created in men a kind of foppery. How peculiar for them to feel that the ways of passion effeminized men and not the lack of passion or girlyness, wasn't it? Boudoir behavior, in other words—male concupiscence—made inroads into the drive that men, at least in their minds, should more properly be using for such classic and time-proven male activities as making poetry, making money, making war."

"Desire they thought unmanly—"

"And softened us, yes. That was the dumb idea. How benighted for one to feel that? A monstrous result today is not only the male need to exaggerate his lust but to be embarrassed by such things as tender emotions. I myself am guilty of that very fault. We tend to suspect the softness in our heart that desire asks of it, which in *Romeo and Juliet* is precisely young Romeo's anxiety when he apotheosizes his love,

> 'O sweet Juliet
> Thy beauty hath made me effeminate,
> And in my temper softened valour's steel.'"

"It's a scandal how badly men abuse women," said Duxbak, shaking his head. "Don't we?"

"I daresay, yes."

"I remember when I was a little boy of about eight or nine reading James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*—the resounding tripartite name of the author alone thrilled me—and being completely shocked at the horror of helpless Cora and Alice Munro being stalked by savage Magua. Stark line drawings in the biscuity old novel I had of my grandfather's made the threats and dangers seem so much more vivid. They have stayed with me all these years, and to this day I can never get used to it." Duxbak well knew of but tried to avoid any reference to his friend's difficulties with Laura Warholic, the mixed emotions he had about her, for he sensed his fatigue. He looked at his watch. "It's 10:45 and then some, I should judge, and I don't want to hold you up, E^2, but let me just say I look around today and honestly

believe women cannot even say, so crucially painful is it to them, how much they *dislike* men, lest they appear like vicious cranks or old maids or man-hating lesbians! I honestly cannot understand the obloquy with which women have to contend." He paused. "Take our office, which is a good example. There is a ferocity there that appalls even Ann Marie Tubb and The Krauthammer, I daresay. I remember how in a friendly way I once tried to show The Krauthammer how to clean a jute rug once, and she almost bit my head off. Ann Marie Tubb clears her throat from phlegm when I walk by. I understand that she cannot stand me. I accept that. But are they not simply wounded creatures? Having been hurt in major ways? I would say that keeping silent at *Quink* is not so much the prerogative of the delicate as a requirement."

"I agree."

"I hope my generosity in taking leave of this grudge is not entirely based upon the fact that I rarely see either of them anymore."

Taking off his eyeglasses, Eyestones squeezed his aching eyes with thumb and forefinger. "I'm as much an offender as anyone." Duxbak made no reply. "Is that what you mean?"

"Poverty needs help," said Duxbak, fingering the grosgrain cord of his glasses. He sipped his tea. "We forget that, don't you agree? Mary and Joseph who were poor badly *needed* the valuable gifts of the Magi in order to get away to Egypt—never mind reside there during their forced exile." He seemed actually to suffer it. "How we all of us fail to remember the desperation of the Holy Family. 'Called out of Egypt!' It was of course to fulfill prophecy that they returned, returning, however, not to Bethlehem, a superior town, notice, but rather to the dorp of Nazareth, which I hasten to add, no matter how discommending it might be, was far from Shangri-La. How strange then that later Jesus specifically stayed in Galilee and kept *away* from Judea—John 7:1—to avoid those men who were seeking to kill him. Numbered among the thugs, who knows, might have been his very own brothers who, we are told, had no faith in him either, John 7:5, to me one of the most shocking facts in the annals of Holy Writ. Only the hand that erases can write the true thing." For all the archaic speech of his friend, Eyestones, smiling, could picture him speaking in Ringlet type. "Neither Christ nor his parents had funds enough to be safe. Was it not want of money, again, that drew the family to the comparatively rough-and-tumble town of Nazareth?"

Lowering his head, Eyestones volunteered a weak smile and kept re-

volving his white cup. "You can't save another person's life, can you?"

"The sensation of the terrible can ruin a life." Duxbak poured more tea. "You can't replace a club broken in anger in professional golf. It's an official rule."

"Meaning?"

"You not only seem tired, Eugene. And preoccupied." He sighed.

"But—"

Duxbak said quietly, "You're Parsifal."

Eyestones quickly waved away the idea and said, "All of that rudeness to you—saddens me."

"'And one will say to him,' quoted Duxbak, '"What are these wounds between your arms?' Then he will answer, 'Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.' Zechariah 13: 6."

An interval of silence followed. Duxbak hesitated to say anything more. He set down his fork. He put his hands together. He bent his head to prompt his friend to smile and said, "Worse things happen at sea."

Eyestones shook his head. " As to me, I feel as if I am getting lost, my mind full of odd, disorderly servants. I'm not interested in money or even bettering myself, as the phrase goes. I'm reclusive. I can't see worth a jot. I can't see objects in front of me half the time. I suffer from nightmares. I have too many opinions. I have low self-esteem, as of course you know. I get too involved with . . . people. Or do I? I remember that you once told me that a day seldom passed when you didn't at some point, however brief, feel like crying. I share that feeling. I can't even remember when it began." He remembered back in those early days when, after he had first started trying to help Laura Warholic with her life, his friend Duxbak, not without unease, had confided to him when a feckful belief in principles had urged him to be frank, "I hate to say this, but don't you see that you are with her because you feel a failure?" "I also feel time-deprived," continued Eyestones, gloomily. "I hate the age of access and lack of solitude. I look around the world today at the lack of altruism, all the marketing impresarios, all the reapportioned technologies, paid-for experiences, all the hustle and burrowing and commodifying, and I don't even belong. E-commerce. The cult of vagueness. Hypercapitalism. Gossip as news. Crass unapologetic materialism. The general subjectivism. The nonreconciliating unmusicalization of everything. I have to say that I agree with you, Duxbak, I cannot stand the lidless, snatching, over-

arching communalism, national and international, that the Internet gives—or the racing urge that people have to need instantly to get in touch with one other. All values seem commercialized. I don't know about the word *global—spherical* is an archaism and *worldwide* is a novelty. I am afraid that I myself have perhaps selfishly pursued personal adventure instead of human relationships in order to, I don't know, feel." He looked up sorrowfully. "Do you believe that one person can truly help another?"

"In the way of?"

"Caring?"

"In regard to?"

"Emotions." He swallowed. "Pity."

"Do you mean regarding Laura Warholic?"

It was Eyestones now who said nothing.

Duxbak leaned forward. The catholicity of his soul, his unfailing attentiveness to others' problems, softly emerged. He felt his crossroads-store shoes begin to pinch, and he paused. "Not when you care for someone else." His words were characteristically sibylline, uttered in a low voice.

"How . . . did you know?"

"You mean when."

"When?"

"I didn't. I just guessed."

A long silence held. Duxbak blinked and said,

> "'Love in my bosom like a bee
> Doth sucke his sweete:
> Now with his wings he playes with me,
> Now with his feete. . . .'

Thomas Lodge."

"My perversion is the belief in true love," said Eugene, sadly.

At that point, Duxbak leaned forward. "On Pesach eve a Jew went in to see the Hassidic rabbi Yosha Ber of Brisk and asked, 'Rabbi, every Jew is supposed to drink four glasses of wine at the Seder. May I drink four glasses of milk instead?' 'God forbid, are you sick?'asked the rabbi. 'No, I'm perfectly well, thank God,' came the reply, 'but I can't afford the price of wine.' The rabbi called his wife and told her to give the man a loan of twenty-five rubles, so that he could buy wine for

the Seder. When the man thanked them and went away, the rebbitzin asked her husband, 'Why did you give him twenty-five rubles? Two rubles surely would have been enough for wine.' There came a pause. 'I understood that the man needed more than the wine from the way he asked his question,' said the rabbi, 'for he would not have asked if he could drink milk if he had meat for the meal.'"

"It's a wise story."

"This place is like the catacombs," said Duxbak, leaning forward to tap his friend's arm, "with two disciples down in the dark, whispering wisdom."

"Or folly."

"Which from which confounding each."

They both laughed.

Both had finished eating. Duxbak took up his umbrella and put on his old worn hat, the disintegrant brim collapsing about his brow and ears like the mobcap of a long-dead granny.

"Shall we stop somewhere for a farewell posset?" Yawning, Eyestones shrugged. "How about a short stroll?" asked Duxbak. "*Post prandium, passus mille*?"

But it had grown late. Duxbak insisted on paying the bill. Outside, blown by rain, they shook hands almost bent over. And, withal, they withdrew.

XXIV

What Do I Have To Get Up From Out Of Being Under For?

Over several years of knowing her Eyestones had intermittently taken Laura to see, among other places, Plymouth Rock, the Newport mansions, Nantucket and Cape Cod, the Wayside Inn, Robert Frost's house in New Hampshire, Saint Joseph's Abbey, the Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts, Mount Washington, Lizzie Borden's house in Fall River, Henry James's grave in Cambridge Cemetery, the Sandwich fish hatchery, and the Westport winery in Rhode Island. They visited the Chocolate Church in Bath, Maine, the Hairpin Turn on the Mohawk Trail, and as recently as the previous summer Pumpkin Knob in Casco Bay, where Eugene practiced taking photos, looking at Laura, thinking of Rapunzel. He showed her around Jack Kerouac's Lowell to see Nicky's Bar, where the novelist drank, and the Owl, where he often ate. They took the train to New York City. During winters they more or less stayed put. Laura always claimed that she could ski—was this merely another boast of hers like being able to draw?—but he never once saw proof of it in all the time that he knew her. On several Saturdays he brought rods and took her fishing down on the Chatham docks on Cape Cod, trying to teach her how to fly-cast, but she was totally uncoordinated. He also gave up a day to take her on a whale-watching excursion out of Provincetown; she

completely lost interest within less than an hour, although it was an all-day trip—a trip, although he was unaware of it at the time, that was in fact a run-through for his later attempts at trying to spy a far thinner version of another mammal—her—sporting out of sight. Eyestones felt that she needed to get away somewhere. It was his way of trying to get her to enjoy something of her life.

He took her to the Arnold Arboretum and to see Malcolm X's house, unmarked at the time, at 72 Dale Street in Roxbury and over to the Museum of Fine Arts to see the miniature Cretan snake goddess, the oldest object of art in the country. "It's impossible to believe anything is that old." Pointing to the strange little details and the coiling snakes, he said, "Baudelaire thought that there was no present, only the bridge of a moment's time, constantly departing, that connects the past with the future." He laughed. "But did you know that the Greeks thought of the past as being ahead of them? That the future was behind? Do you see what I'm saying? The past is what we actually see, what we know, what we are truly facing. The future is what is taking place behind our backs! I guess a way to inhabit the present is to revisit it in a work of art. Art embalms the past, portraying it as present."

Popping her eyes, Laura smiled her gummy smile. "Maybe you'll write a book about me, E^2, and I'll be memorialized for life."

Eugene also showed her much of historical Boston. He loved walking. "Archives for the feet," he called it, leading her from one end of the Freedom Trail to the other. They visited Concord several times where on different days they walked around Walden Pond, peered into the Old Manse, and toured Emerson's house. At one point they drove by Concord Academy, where Eugene pointed out that Lisa Halaby graduated from high school in 1968. Laura gave a yellow yawn. "It looks like a place where girls have names like Sloane and Grayson and Mackenzie and, I don't know," she snorted, "Rain." She swallowed hard. "You like that sort of person, don't you, Diablo Man? 'O Rainie-Poo,'" she mocked, "'why don't we get Mopsie and Olay and all dodge off to Bonwit Tellers to buy leg-warmers? Maybe stop at the Ritz? How about a spot of tea?" Eugene who knew how thin-skinned she was on the subject said nothing, at the same time trying hard as to repress in his memory a weird image of her in a black raincoat flying past him to catch a ferry at Wood's Hole and looking like a repulsive dermapteran insect. "Who is Lisa Mae Blabby, anyway, that I should care?" asked Laura. "Lisa Halaby," he corrected her. "Queen Noor

of Jordan." "Oh you mean the *beautiful* Queen Noor of Jordan, how could I forget?" angrily snapped Laura and went into one of her subnivian tunnels for an hour. He tried to cheer her up at the old Concord Bridge, but she who was leery of visionaries had small concentration and often at such locales would ask, Johnny Rotten-style, "Where's the ach-shee-unn?" So one morning, in the early dawn of an April 19th, he decided he would take her up to Lexington Green to watch the reenactment of the first battle of the Revolutionary War. It was a festive day. A few news helicopters flew overheard as Eugene and Laura sat on a grassy knoll. Eugene watched them, as there was no one to talk to. "What are you dreaming about?" she asked, momentarily lifting an earplug from the cassette-player she held. "Nothing," he said. "Tell me." "I was thinking only how vulnerable we were up there back in the war. All of our combat helicopters in those days lacked armored cockpits for crew protection. Only later came those Hughes AH-64s and Mi-24 Hinds that the Soviets used when they invaded Afghanistan. We had only a single light-caliber machine gun. A well-placed rifle shot from Charlie could bring down one of those poor snake-bitten choppers of ours. We lost five thousand of them in Vietnam. I've seen them." There was suddenly the sound of drums, fifes, and parades of determined marching men. British troops and Colonials squared off in a dramatic hail of ball and shot, but Laura Warholic's modulated fascination with that historic standoff, coordinate with her rhythmic bopping head-with-earphones, had been momentarily diverted by the sounds of a certain rock group that had suddenly come in on her Walkman. She literally bounced. "Omigod, omigod, listen to this! *It's the Slucks!*" she screamed, trying to push her plugs into Eugene's ears, hopping up and down, and shouting at an even louder decibel. "The Craven Slucks! Listen! Can you hear the amazing fracture on that cool organ solo? Speed garage, verging on acid jazz! I happen to .know they recorded that at Lanes in Boston! I am *sooooo* into them!" It was obvious that a new cassette had been shoved into the machine of her head. So what else was new? Eyestones could only laugh.

Nevertheless, it seemed sociologically diagnostic, he thought, that upon the commemorial occasion of America's Birth of Freedom, with its high spectacle and drama, Laura with two rubber plugs in her ears was comically bellowing out to no one in particular, "Get funky with yo' bad self!"

It was especially sad because only the previous week he felt he was

converting her, when at his house after she had played some trashcan-banging music he had asked, "Do you call that music, Laura? Listen to this," and put on his turntable Lonnie Johnson's "Tomorrow Night." "It is so uncomplicatedly great. Piano, guitar," said Eugene. "An astonishing voice. And such a sweet melody. Nineteen forty-seven."

> Tomorrow night
> Will you remember what you said tonight?
> Tomorrow night
> Will it be just another memory?
> Or just another lovely song
> That's in my heart
> To linger on.

And even Laura said, "Amazing."

They took the *Gray Lady II* to Nantucket. Laura typically dragged through most of the day, complaining that the islanders were too snotty and rich. Eyestones had often heard such grizzles from her before, notably on the occasion of a christening they once attended, the one and only time that he had ever seen Laura actually dress up—she wore a maroon blouse and a buffalo-check wool-and-polyester skirt—when visiting some close friends of his in wealthy Belmont he heard her repeat all afternoon, standing near and feeling the cool *cabine* of several elegant women in the gathering, how ill-at-ease she felt. He could not believe his ears. They were snobs because *she* felt uncomfortable? It was a criticism that in its upside-down logic and irrationality brought him back to his days in Vietnam by reminding him how many native women there who did not want to be observed would fling up their *panung* so that their heads rather than their bottoms were covered, an inversion of modesty perhaps from their viewpoint but nobody else's. Trying to be fair, Eyestones confided to her on the boatride back, "I agree, Laura. Nantucket is wealthy, and I suppose people are too well off there. It is one of the reasons why that particular place is sexless, at least according to the composer Ned Rorem. 'Sexiness comes from the financially underprivileged,' he wrote. 'The rich don't *need* to be sexy. Any Greek waiter or *ragazzo di vita* exudes more carnality than the handsomest duke in town. A beautiful woman, no matter how wealthy, is still underprivileged and by that token sexual.' I agree with him. Still, why do you let rich people bother you so? You are the reverse of

a woman I once knew a pushy Brazilian, who having attended by luck a private high school on scholarship, spent the subsequent years—even though, after half-a-lifetime of going to school, college, grad school, she had not a cent to her name—looking down on the poor. It was logical for that poor deludinoid to maintain that myth, to foster that need, to maintain that snobbism, even though it was her own self she hated!"

They once went to Newport and he recalled how Laura looked at the great mansions with disapproval, the walkways all neatly paved and cambered, the rolling lawns cut to exact geometries and sloping perfection and the high hedges freshly clipped. Her envy had been informed of course by its usual drive. Her disagreeableness, winding him up, began to hurt his eyes. Eugene took off and wiped his glasses, which were not merely thick but seemed virtually spherical, like a pair of fat glass marbles.

"What assholes around here. Don't give me that you-believe-you-understand-what-you-think-I-said-but-I'm-not-sure-you-realize-that-what-you-heard-is-not-what-I-meant shit," she brayed. Some pretty girls had been flirtatiously looking at Eyestones, and she hated it. "Look at them all. What am I supposed to do? Shit a miracle?"

They kept on walking.

"I hate, like, total icy snobs."

"Where?"

She head-bobbed to a yacht. "Them." She shrugged. "Everybody."

"You could have money."

"How? *How?*" she quacked twice.

"By working. You only sabotage yourself. I think it's only a way of needing someone, Laura," expostulated Eugene. "You are always walking underwater."

"I don't want to discuss it," she snapped, too cold and irritated coming back from a ride on a windy ferry, which they almost missed for her having endlessly dawdled in a handbag shop in a cobblestoned mews there. "Except that I've seen those annoying trust-fund types all my life and they think they shit strawberry shortcake."

Laura Warholic had a long nose on a rather plain face in her constant jealousy. There was a conflict with every passing woman. A telephone call. An ad showing a dewy model in a fashion magazine. Any jogger. Waitresses of any age, young or old. A female stranger who

might stop and ask directions. Every letter with a shapely calligraphy. A photograph on a wall. It did not matter. Everything was challenged. "What are you looking at?" she peevishly asked one morning after both of them had gone jogging at an outdoor track and Eugene, out of breath, was simply staring—not a figure was in sight—into the middle distance. No letter he ever received went unscrutinized whenever she was present, no memo, no message, no note not held in suspicion. Any event even remotely connecting him to a woman hijacked her with the obsessive need to pry. The mildest praise he gave to a young woman skating on television, of a portrait in a museum, of a ballerina's art fixed Laura's face into a terrible fist of fury. The inquisitorial lamp was always lit. Any relationship, no matter how innocuous, was a liaison, any scenario in which a girl or a woman might appear provoked her beyond the limit. One time just before heading into a breakfast nook he had literally never once before patronized in *order to buy a cup of coffee for her* she challenged him with, "What, are you going in there to ogle the waitresses?" Coping with such a frantic and desperately jealous person was truly not possible. It was as if he literally had to refuse to see, ignore, dodge, pass by, overlook, become indifferent to—in many instances, in order to get along, even out-and-out condemn or belittle—half the human population on earth merely to appease, never mind please, a single person.

Later that night, after they had returned to Cambridge, she telephoned him to apologize. "Do you know what I would like?" she asked. "I would like to own a bookshop and live in a room on top of it. That way, when I wake up, I can just have breakfast and just go downstairs."

"But—"

"I have to go now," said Laura and hung up.

She often telephoned him at odd moments, mostly in request of something, and she still sent him letters on frayed pages, ripped from a small notebook, never without torn holes and always inkily written on both sides with the gooseflesh-imprint of a cacography riddled with censored lines and hysterical with marginal additions, squiggled arrows, odd snibbled-out ideas and reconsidered afterthoughts in loops and balloons, a schoolgirl script that varied according to mood, stress, and perhaps dosage of medication. His preoccupations and concerns were always other than hers. His tropisms held. Reckless disposal of waste. Ruined air. Global warming. Jeremiads of his she ignored. But

mainly he tried to please her. Out of pity he tried to include her in what he did, invite her to see what he saw. They were always late because of her—late for dinner, late to the movies, late leaving on a trip. She figured if she was going nowhere in life, why be early? On Saturdays they often went together to book sales, flea markets, or rummage sales. Her listlessness took the form of her taking hours to get out of the car whenever they stopped, and she did not walk, she galumphed, bow-legged, never wearing the right footwear for rough terrain but leather shoes, big black ones, like sledgehammers, just trudging about, bow-legged, one hip lower than the other, with that beat-up black shoulder bag of hers and black wallet from which she rarely drew any money—granted, she had little—the size and shape of a huge knob of cheese.

"I saw an ad in the classifieds yesterday that would be perfect for you," Eugene told her one Saturday morning. "Teaching English as a foreign language. You can teach and travel at the same time."

"Why bother?" she yawned.

"To get out from under."

Laura paused and then asked, "What do I have to get up from out of being under for?"

Conversation with her was always limited. She was one of those people who had never sustained a humanist thought, never mind thought about God, but who loudly boasted at every turn—it is so easy, the non-seeker's best comfort—as if she had been pondering Scripture for half a lifetime on the subject, that she was an agnostic. She liked to eat breakfast at diners. She threw out ideas at various times like suddenly wanting to write a book or to visit Greece or to sketch trees or to listen to *Guys and Dolls* or to read Yeats, but within days, often within hours, she would completely lose her energy for each and every project almost as if the mere suddenness of a new interest was the best reason it should end. She thought of booth-dancing once, which Eyestones found hard to picture, at another time she wanted to be a gown model. Her brief enthusiasms always flamed out. At one time or other, she wanted to collect postcards, to visit a winery, to counsel the mentally challenged, to paint, to learn all about martinis, and of course to own a bookshop with always that added stipulation, rounding out that fantasy, that she could live above it. A day later, the dream was gone. Was indecision her key to flexibility? Failure, the romantic way of succeeding? She pored over the "Help Wanted" ads in the *Boston Globe* every Sunday, underlining items with a yellow highlighter, and

even occasionally sent out letters. Little ever happened. She veered and zigzagged in the obliqueness of her life, ship-prow sharp at every turn, proving only that every angle makes another angle. What she failed to see, of course, was that she was, subtextually, defining her own failures with jobs, with education, especially with men. *Nothing* lasted with her. No faith, no fealty. No hope, no hobby. No dream, no desire. Certainly, no promise. And of course no job. But that was not something she wanted. Eyestones almost laughed when he reflected that in Vietnamese the phrase *tu do* meant freedom! Laura was the kind of person who would decline a job because it did not come with an ergometric chair or if her interviewer had been a curvaceous or attractive woman, which would have offended her. Her language of complaint, virtually a daily exercise, had almost a moral strategy to it. Probably the only single, consistent note Laura ever sounded for long was the middlingly boring fixation she had imported to Massachusetts from the West Coast of always insisting on drinking good coffee, a subject on which in her delicate fussifications were priggish beyond words. That, and her continuous and unappeasable sexual jitters, always loudly and crudely expressed, for any get-at-able fellow, whether she saw him at a café or on a train or at a beach or sitting alone at a movie.

They often went into Chinatown to the Yee Hong Guey on Tyler Street in Boston for lemon chicken, in Cambridge for black-bean lobster, but he noticed to the Asian men, good-looking waiters shining with beauty, she gave little notice—her paraphilia was almost exclusively for long-haired rocker types, sex elves from big-hair bands who, grotesquely, always seemed to appear in groups of four.

She was self-defeatingly plural, outfoxing herself in the pursuit of multiple men by sacrificing need to numbers and then complaining about it. They said in old Greenland that when someone drowns, he or she died because she borrowed—or stole—someone else's kayak. It was as if, in the final analysis, she appropriated what she could not handle, in the way that a woman who is loaded with a feminism stronger than she is ultimately defeats herself in the tactic. Laura was too small for her own greed, confounding herself by her own reports, for while she loved to give details about her past affairs and former boyfriends, she was framing a portrait that, when forged, she could not defend and, when freakish, she had to deny. It was often embarrassing, a teen-girl preoccupation that usually left her unhappy by way of a kind of a priapic defeatism with whomever was accompanying her at

the time. As she told it, Eugene understood that from the very first days of her youth, fearful of self-reliance and fully dependent on someone else or more, she followed the "flagstone" syndrome—never leave one man without another one waiting to take his place, which is perhaps understandable in a scheming kleptocrat but odd for an angry and compulsive self-righteous, blame-shifting labor-baiter with the words *appropriateness* and *women's rights* always on her lips.

The way it had all come to an end, at least for him, was the interminable and exhausting cross-country trip that they had taken together the previous summer, when after having such extended glimpses of each other, more perhaps than anyone should have, he came to realize with a strong, almost radioactive certainty, spontaneously emitting beta-electrons and gamma-rays, that merely being with this woman, for days, never mind weeks—forget living with her—was absolutely impossible. "Want to go west?" Eugene Eyestones had suggested on one of those dark, rainy afternoons in New England that made one think of the converging powers of dread and shuddering musical movements of Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust* when he not only found himself unappeasingly restless but Laura characteristically in-between jobs and wasting time—"goosing butterflies," as Eyestones put it—and more than usually depressed. Her laziness and self-defeat she often tried heroically to align to a Marxist intransigence, but it was not that; she simply had neither the solid imagination to project nor the real dreams to pursue such vision and was only animated invidiously by the bitter reflection that women ten years younger than she still had a healthy desire to get on with their lives. There was a period when Laura mentioned cleaning Eugene's rooms for money—"sweat equity"—when after several weeks she could not land even a temporary job. Clean his rooms!? It broke his heart to hear her have to suggest that, just as much as it did when in reflective if lucid moments she would say—that word—she had to "fix herself."

If it had been the case that the first months or so of knowing Laura had been happier, when at the beginning she was not so dependent on him, it was because he did not fully know her nor she him and they had seen each other rarely, sometimes only once a month. He wanted to be decent to her. He cared not to want to desert her. Hadn't Zeno ingeniously argued that one cannot travel any distance until he traveled part of that distance, no matter how small that distance was? He was resolved to help. It was the beginning of summer and warm.

He could take a vacation and had enough funds if he kept an eye on expenditures. He had made it clear from the beginning that there was nothing of consequence between them, but she had always grabbed at any free offer. It was as if the option to her of doing anything for nothing alone made that objective worthwhile.

She took out a stick of gum and mumped it. "Go where exactly?"

"Excuse me?"

"Where do you want to go?" asked Laura, eyeing him skeptically. "This so-called trip."

Eugene remembered the very day he had wanted to get out of Boston, specifically distinguishing what he wanted from where he was, for after an afternoon of walking around the Arnold Arboretum out at Forest Hills, he and Laura had decided before going home to eat at a small neighborhood pub and restaurant in Jamaica Plain called O'Boy's. It was a dingy, eighth-rate bar-and-grill on a corner run by four wheezing Irish brothers with red faces and potbellies. The main room looked like the ground floor of a bad, early Western hotel, with tin ceilings, buckled linoleum floors, and poorly executed murals. Blaring Irish music forced people to shout. "Hawaya!" people yelled. "Gimme a cawfee regulluh!" "Hey Eddie, whayah's my plattuh?" "Ovah heah!" "I'll have a lobstah romelette!" "Gotta glassa wattuh?" "Who's havin' cawd and who's havin' floundah and who's havin steemiz?" asked the fattest of the brothers appearing on the floor in a round apron that gave him the look of an enormous white moon. "Tuner's fresh today. You want some tuner fish, O'Reilly? I also got lobstah and scrawd." One of the lowbrows in the bar who had looked into *Quink* and had read one or two of Eyestone's essays actually recognized him and staring at him from a waxy face said with a scowl, "I never see a pen but what I think of a snake."

It was the type of joint where one heard the kind of mindless brawling that goes for discourse in this country. Groups of fat, disheveled guys wearing paddy hats and with names like Mikey, Lynchie, Sully, and Obie, sat in grubby wooden booths sucking beers and singing stupid shaving songs like "H-A-Double-R-I-G-A-N" and "Did Your Mother Come from Ireland?" and "Southie Is My Home Town" while at various intervals some droolie or other in his cups would stand up on a chair and, with blowing nationalism as he faced a framed portrait of the Irish patriot Wolfe Tone on the wall, mispronouncedly shout, "*Shlánta!*" Other men at the bar, long-faced, inarticulate dumbbells lu-

gubriously drinking ale, simply perched on their stools gripping their pints like grenades and glared with unsteady stares at their baleful reflections in the long bar mirror at the end of which in a special niche was boxed an old yellowing photograph of Michael Collins in full military regalia. "Who in this group is attendin' Fitzroy's wake tonight, seeing as they are plantin' the poor fella tomorrow?" It was one of two anti-intellectual copepods in a far corner over by the bar, regulars there, one with the loud, booming voice of a street peddler, the other shaking as if by way of adding information his rolled copy of the *Boston Herald*, a newspaper whose tabloidal content and general sleaze had justifiably earned it the local title of the "Wrestling News." "We lost poor Fitzroy, God rest his soul?" piped up a small ruddy-faced weasel in a hairy vest. "He sneezed in the sun in mid-traffic along the Jamaicaway out motoring with his missus back from Franklin Park Zoo last Saturday and drove straight into a tree." "Where's the wake?" someone asked. "Ovah in Dot"—Dorchester—"according to the paper." "Going to his funeral, did you say?" queried a small angry man who looked like a troll with a nose swollen and maroon with wine buds. "Going to the funeral for a party who when he was alive wouldn't tell ya if your own ass was on fire, is it?"

"I lent him twenty-five bucks a year ago and never saw it again, the deadbeat."

"Likewise. And himself with his toffee-nosed airs always billboarding about his connections to City Hall. Were he alive, I'd give him some face time with sweet lady knuckles, how's that?"

A man named Whouley, nose red as a poppy, piped up over his mug, "Gets a cushy job over at Government Center and wouldn't a recognized a day's work if it walked up and bit him in the tits."

"Came from nothin'," said another.

> "And before she left Killarney
> did you mother kiss the Blarney?
> 'Cos your little touch of brogue
> you can't disguise,"

sang a drunk in a corner.

> "Oh! I wouldn't be romancin',
> I can almost see you dancin'

while the daa dee da dee da de dum—"

"Look at all these goddam balloonheads!" Eugene turned to look behind him. It was Ratnaster, of all people, coldly standing there like a sudden unlooked-for road obstacle with that typical facial expression of his that seemed always on the verge of discovering something rotten, his deathful, unforgiving eyes black, flat, and hard. He had come into the bar to buy a pack of cigarettes. Like all anarchists, he looked suspiciously uneasy and out-of-place indoors. Standing back in the shadows with the wide brim of his felt hat turned down all the way around, like a tall umbrella, shading his face so that he seemed near death, he bent back his black-gloved hand, to clicks, crying out with disgust against the Deity, which in its fury somehow never failed to sound like an angry descant on his own deformity and deficiency. "The dregs of the world all gathered in one joint," he said, looking around him—Eyestones wondered if the allusion was to his own paraplegia—"dopes, out-and-out simpletons, xenophobic mugworts, trash slaves, urban skunks with mid-range IQs, ill-informed primeval howlets, perfect dunces, each one stupider than the next. The Irish! An anti-culture of yeggs, zeros, blabbers, buncomb-artists, and skullduggers. One half are born racists, the other half Roman Catholic fanatics on the march swinging their mad rosaries and spreading no end of what John Lennon called 'godshit.' And I thought Welfare's was bad! All these Bulgers, Beattys, Barnicles, Barrys, and Burkes. Poltroons. Oafs. Stupid as donkeys with their boots and beetlebungs! Hacks, whores, and hangers-on. Not a fucking brain among them! Class-A hypocrites and hapless nitwits who are always singing a lot of bollocks about the old Emerald Isle but in the final analysis wouldn't be caught dead there. As Lady Astor declared, 'They always go forwards looking backwards.' Boston was lucky, wasn't it? Because the Cunard Line terminus was located in Boston at the time, the wretched Irish landed here, illiterate, sunk in defeat, like cattle, and then more than tripled the population! 'Puritan New England culture,' as Gore Vidal observed, 'now fallen into Irish-ness and sloth.' Listen to the way they *quack*! A brogue you call it? I agree with Discknickers who once told an Irishman who spoke like that to learn fucking English or leave the goddamnn country! Fucking firbolgs! Hogan's goats! Finbar, Ronan, Colin, and Mickey the Dunce! But hearken to the patrician posturing of that benighted race! They all long to be English! Dream of waking up in the manicured gardens of

Cliveden! The way the dwarf felon and feral right-winger G. Gordon Liddy, born of Irish immigrants, on his cretinous radio talk-show goes out of his way to rhyme *been* with *seen* and *again* with *rain*!" Ratnaster, swallowing, coldly stared at Eyestones with that cataract of gray marble. "Never forget: Gerald O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*—a novel not about the North versus the South, remember, but about the Old versus the New South—was not landed gentry but won the plantation, Tara, in a fucking card game!

"See those two fat policemen at the trough over in the corner?" Ratnaster turned his back, pocketed his cigarettes, and said with a sneer, "The ugly jigsaw head by the bar whose name is McKeag—" Eyestones noticed a man with the red gills and bright eyes of a fresh dead fish—"told me that 'Taffy,' the pottled drum-bellied cop with the bald head, was scarfing down a big farmer's breakfast here one morning while supposedly on the clock last fall when the police chief came waddling in. To hide, the mooch cut and went running and jumped off the old loading platform out back and broke an ankle. Claiming later that he incurred the injury in the line of duty, he ended up not only taking a monthly check for doing security for this joint but has been living on a large state disability ever since. 'Tangle,' his wide-bodied buddy over there with his face in that big bowl of corned beef? Another freebooter, according to loudmouth McKeag. Might as well be a 'bonus shark.' Notice that cardboard box by his foot? It's full of frozen steaks. He happened to catch a butcher over in Forest Hills with his thumb on the scale while weighing meat, but he didn't arrest him, he just stopped paying for any meat he got there—the chokehold—after coming to, um, an accommodation.

"Look at them!" cried Ratnaster. "A diet of starchy potatoes! Did you know that the potato was a staple imported by the British? The Irish valued food only as a source of energy. Meals to the poor buggers were never familial or communal events—they were consumed in isolation at convenient or set times. Like squirrels. There is no Irish cuisine in North America. It is like the simple pots of Hottentot grub. Forget about food. How about drinking? And drunken rowdiness? Ever wonder why all Irish bars have brutal and nasty names like Knocko's Ale House? Hurricane O'Reilly's? Donnybrook's? Hartigan's Hole? Queeny's Pig Bar? Mudcat Leary's? Dropkick Murphy's? The Whistling Ferret?" With a grim intonation with which no melody coincided, Ratnaster with something of a sightless stare began to chant,

"And let me the Callahans clink, clink;
And let me the Callahans clink, clink;
A mick's but a man
With no brain in his pan,
Why then, let the poor dummy drink."

"Some wine, boys!"

"'Fore God, a bigoted song,'" quoted Eugene Eyestones, who was well read. But he had heard all of this before and yawned.

"Some people hate cops, some lawyers, and some politicians, I personally cannot stand the Irish and the despicable cant they consistently spew! No wonder all these poor, bathetic, maudlin undercooks and meretricious dopes and double-yokers live out their priest-ridden lives reeling around half-crocked and drooling on their shoes. Do you blame them? Can you? Do you know who I blame? I blame God, that's who. I blame him and his pursuivants and spit on all the interdictions and prohibitions he exacts in turning such bulb-brains as you see here into scared, stupid, superstitious lackeys and political hacks surrounded by smoky candles who go bowing and scraping to kiss the papal rings and slippers, like the Phoenicians of old who in their confused absorptions after piling up dead goats to their idols heated the waiting feet of their iron gods with their scalding tears until they glowed and all for what?" Ratnaster ferociously banged the table. "God, the bottomless pit! God, the mundane feroce! God, the Toltec idol! God, the pitch-black varnisher! God, the politician! God, the Metaphorsician! God, the demon barber! God, the merciless dwarf! God the killer! God, the fear force! God, the willing executioner! God, the gyra and the gangster! God, ther Zadokite Messiah! God, the hanging judge! God, the Neutral Eye! God, the dog!"

Ratnaster then turned abruptly on his heel and disdainfully walked out the front door without a word and not looking back at a single soul. Several toothless, fox-faced, and squob-fat red-faced crones of about seventy, women with raw, unkept hair sitting in a front booth catcalled after him, a short one with a voice like a crotalum, shouting, "You givin' us the frozen mitt, boyo?"—strangers they disliked there—while the others, half-toasted, only blankly looked up and then returned to rattle through their newspapers and doodles in the whiskey puddles on the tables, allowing another idler or some city-employee-in-hiding to

join them with all kinds of palaver such as "Ya cahn't believe the traffic out theah!" "Ya cahn't fight 'em, Burkie." "Fah chrissakes, ya take ya life in ya hands nowadays." "They're all fuller shit!" "Ya goin' to that time for Bingo McBoing Boing tomorrow?" "Them people hate the chorch!" "Wanna go to Cape Cawd?" "You look like the Bawston strangla!" "Is this the Pahk to Alhington train? Ah you shoah?" "Meet you at the cawna." "Hey, wait up, Doolie! I gotta fiva for some beahs!" "Hey, Sully, how the Sawx doin'?" Eyestones almost laughed as he heard in his mind the echo of a mocking and irreverent Discknickers' imitation: "Top o' the morning, Mrs. McCurdy, and hoy be yer two bunions this marnin'?"

Sports talk shows, "nit-wit radio," a radio forum popular in Boston dealing with the one subject on earth about which any moron can be an expert, were kept on all day at O'Boy's café. The resident program hosts were for the most part surly, insecure ignoramuses with local accents, always white and mostly Irish, critical pilot fish, weak parasites who themselves never played a sport, sarcastic losers with no education trying to fob themselves off as psychiatrists, fat idlers snarling at each other hour after hour over the huge salaries that they resented black athletes receiving—at their own expense, they implied—and splitting hairs about nothing. It is all heat without light, interminable arguments replacing informed opinion. The gerbils who called into the shows were even worse. The idea, "If you can't play it, say it," applied to them all. There is a terribly high impotence quotient in sports fans and callers. The prevalent commercials on such shows are for erectile dysfuction pills and powders.

Pathetically, Boston Red Sox fans always overreact when they win and always overreact when they lose. Hating the great New York Yankees, champions of twenty-six World Series and counting, alone gives Red Sox fans their stature, the ongoing comparison of which, ignored in Manhattan, remains Boston's saddest, most provincial feature, self-aggrandizement by association. And why? The Boston Red Sox up until recently had not won a World Series since 1918, one of the most embarrassing facts in the history of all American sport. For almost a full century a full-throated championship roar in Fenway Park for a World Series never took place. It is even more complicated. There is a well-known but unstateable subtext in this so-called rivalry in the Northeast that no one ever dares mention, namely the ethnic factor: the Italians (Yankees) vs. the Irish (Red Sox). The Bronx Bombers have always had

either a "dago" or a black hero and usually more than one of each while the lowly Red Sox, the very last team in the Major Leagues to hire a black baseball player, has remained for entire decades as white as whale-shit and somehow, always, connotatively more Irish. Major league baseball in Boston, providing comic relief year-in and year-out, is broadcast with the kind of self-consciously irrational and parochial optimism made manifest during games in laughably memorable if delusional statements from hometown broadcasters such as, "Don't leave yet! The winning run is on deck!" and "Sox down 15 to 1. Last of the ninth. Two out. Cross your fingers!" The Old Town Team never really *lost* a ball game either. It was always euphemistically reported that the Bosox "came up short last night" or "dropped four in a row but showed some amazing pitching." Forget the expression, "Wait until next year." In Boston that pathetic but reiterated phrase has the same ring to the handful of realistic citizens left in the city, nudging each other, as the proverbial "The check is in the mail."

"It's better than that faggot radio WFNX!" snapped one of the angry, drunken yobbos at O'Boy's leaning out of a booth, and pulling up the sleeves of his filthy cable-knit sweater, of the sort whose pattern manages to give you a headache, he halved a corned-beef sandwich in one Thyestean bite while being served another glass of ale by one of the American-Irish waitresses there, one of several there who thanks to their parvenu parents were given Irish surnames for first names, a pathetic convention among the Boston lace-curtain Irish thought to impart dignity and a certain type of pedigree: names like Riley, Kerry, Ryan, Connor, Beckett, Quinn, Kelsey, Cassidy, Bailey, Glenn, Kyle, Keegan, Donovan, Morgan, and Shannon. "As to Mr. Fitzroy's wake?" howled the yobbo. "Bugger the dead bastard! I hope he rots forever in the bottomless grave he is thrown in. It's a filthy, stinking, lying Orangeman's name it is, bejesus, common as a fucking lampshade-finial, always was, always will be!"

"That's pissah, Whouley, speakin' ill of the dead," shouted McKeag. "Be loyal to your own, is what I say."

"How soon we fuckin' forget! The Wild Colonial Boy was killed in Australia *by a Fitzroy*," stated the mad hawing national, spitting on the name, his face as round as a Celtic bodhran, "who hunting him down, curse his mother, demanded, 'Surrender in the Queen's name' and then shot him down like a dog. A sixteen-year-old boy!" A man of indeterminable age, wearing one of those ugly paddy caps of thirty-

two-ounce wool and whose physical appearance lent much credence to the medieval theory that human life began in bogwater, raised his glass in memorial and said, "Here's to brave young Jack! Right back at ya, Lynchie! Go take a running jump at yourself!"

A guy, sadly tapping Laura's arm, dolefully offered, "The Irish national anthem. 'It's all about bringing them down.'"

A fight almost broke out. Violence. Chaos. The Irish, realized Eyestones, with their unassimilated peeves seem never to know who they are until they meet what they hate, defining themselves in fact by nothing more than what they are not. He began to wonder if maybe Ratnaster was not correct. An irony not lost on him as he watched the angry confrontations between one pachycephalosaurid and another under the watchful eyes of Michael Collins, Commander-in-Chief of the Free State Army of Ireland, was that the so-called hero in that cheap old photo, regarding traitorousness, had himself hypocritically accepted the Treaty of England and in crude point of fact was not much different than Lord Haw Haw, the vile World War II traitor also born in Ireland whose real name was William Joyce. What was it with this discontented and annoying people? In July 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, an unruly racist mob of over 50,000 Irish workingmen swarmed into the New York City draft office, torched the curtains, set the entire place on fire, attacked and looted every room, punching everyone in sight, and then turning their unappeasable wrath on most of the city's innocent black population proceeded at random wantonly to slaughter hundreds of them during the worst race riot in the history of the United States.

Eyestones seriously began to wonder if the Irish as a race, with all fist-fighting and blarney-oiled tales of poverty and stereotypical wallowing in self-deception about loving their old sod but never giving a thought to living there, did not create violence in order to court death because of their neurotic love of funerals! He had an acquaintance, one of the local sons of the Celtic Twilight, a puffy, red-faced alcoholic named Gerry Berry who every lunch hour left work to walk around cemeteries with God-knows-what-kind-of-romantic-twaddle going on in his thick head, plodding among the old gravestones on melancholy ambages that took him from one gravestone to another as if in doing so he were ritualistically fulfilling some ghoulish vow or act of faith or some sort of dark Hibernian pledge to earn a special place in heaven.

But it was not just one thing, it was everything about Boston from

which at the time Eugene Eyestones wanted to get away: the lying and thieving politicians who voted themselves lifetime pensions secretly backdoored through their very own committees, the crass nepotism, all those strawberry-faced, gor-bellied Boston cops arse-looping around in their official cars confiscating drugs and guns only to sell them later for fast cash; the state policemen on the take, pooled from the dumbest, meanest bullies in high school; the exorbitant taxes; the lack of parking spaces; the incessant traffic jams; all the mischief in courts, politically appointed judges and hack lawyers, the endless civic corruption in City Hall; the one-party system by which Democrats with diabolical ingenuity have been infiltrating and destroying the state for ages; the blatant racism and reaction in the city; the crass pension thieves; the state workers and idlers who show up for work whenever they want; the provincial atmosphere of the place, all the parochialism, the corrupt pols and lying, diddling priests, and phony hand-shakers—it was true what he had heard, you always know you're from Boston if you think you are superior to everybody but have never traveled anywhere else—all of whom seemed to meet at O'Boy's Café. "I never like to go to Boston," a drunken Irishman once confessed to Eyestones, nudging him. "Why?" he asked. "Because everybody looks like me!" It was all in all a parade of scullion-ugly, jut-jawed, turnip-nosed, red-faced, pale-shinned, watery-eyed cabbages stumbling from room to room and hooting and shouting with their Boston accents—"Gedadaheah!" "Gimme a hot dawg!" "Two mokah rahmond cwoffees!" "It's hahf-pahst foah!" "A stawm's blowin' down from the nawth!" "Where's my pockabook?" "Can you spare a quadduh?" "Got to go to the irondeer"—eye and ear—"infirmary!" "I'm flying Delta Rearlines!" "Wanna hit the hosses?" etc.—that fully convinced Eugene Eyestones that if he did not leave town immediately he would explode.

"I said, go where?" shouted Laura over the din. Her tiny ladybug earrings made her ears seem even more pointed and comic. "I can't fucking hear you."

"The left coast."

"Been there, done that, Pudding Pop," she replied, as if she were Richard Halliburton in a pith helmet paddling in from Tanganyika.

"So?"

She snapped her gum. "So what?"

"I mean drive out there." He shrugged. "Tonight."

"As if." She chewed and snapped her gum like a sub-Arctic Eskimo

etching a design on birchbark with human bites.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Oh just picture!" She paused a moment and then leaned forward. "*Tonight?*"

"Why not?"

"Are you serious?"

"Never more so."

"Straight west, Circus Peanut?"

"Following the Sunshine Highway, stopping where we want, all the way to Smogtown and back!"

"So why are we sitting here?"

XXV
Cheap Trick

Once they were on the road, Eugene outlined his idea of driving cross-country to look at barnfuls of old 78s. Licorice discs! A vinyl voyage! He had done it once before just to clear his head after he had returned from Southeast Asia to what seemed like nobody and nowhere. Then he had done it alone. Laura had readily assented, having nothing else to do. The trip took two and a half months. It was half fun with her accompanying him, half hell. As usual, it was the little things that became irritating. Shapes are patterns, and patterns become insistent in what regarding a person's sub-routines are forced to consequence by the repetitions of habit. At first she seemed happy.

"This is great, Crumb Cake," she enthusiastically exclaimed as they drove through the dappled foliage of Connecticut. "Did you know that the word *Norwich* was popularly used by British soldiers during World War II to sign off when writing letters to their girlfriends and/or wives?" asked Eyestones. "Why so?" "It stood for 'nickers off ready when I come home.'" Laura laughed. Her goodwill lasted for only a few days, however. She was not really given to help—with anything. She paid for nothing. She didn't drive, wasn't much with a map, had no sense of direction, and could not cook, knew just about enough, in fact, to make a sandwich. But that wasn't the worst. They say it is not what we know but how we learn it, and although Eyestones had had prior glimpses of it she became a symbol before a few days were out

less of cruel and tedious unreason than of tedium, just plain dullness. Simply, she was wanting in the department of simple happiness.

He wanted to travel. It was a change he badly needed, or so he thought at the time. One could, if one were budget-conscious. He used to think nothing of flying down to Brazil to hike new trails or to look for unmapped waterfalls and mineral streams in Chile or to trudge through the lunarlike Valley of Desolation in Dominica or to mountain-bike on his titanium-framed Masi in the Cordillera Central through rain forests, boiling mud, and geysers, or to trek up on Pico Duarte, the Caribbean's highest mountain at 10,400 feet. No, he yearned to head out anywhere.

At first, they traveled without stress or pressure. Laura initially seemed grateful to be going. She was willing to learn to be helpful, as they put miles behind them, by paying attention to signs and by handling the toll-money, but by the time they got to Albany she was more out of sorts than in. "Well? Aren't you excited?" "Fit to pop," she said, snapping her gum. Her scowl was unpropitious, but he was going to try. They soon realized how much time they had on their hands together and lengths of hours, afternoons, days to converse. As the days passed, she confided in him about some of her life, telling him in the intervening hours certain plans, as if by dint of ignoring the passing landscapes that seemed to hold less and less interest for her. There was a lot more than he knew about the rainy emptiness of her past life. Sketchily, in the beginning, but eventually a history formed. Her story became the sophisms of her dejection. She said she worked for a year in a Burger King restaurant, explaining that she was nothing but a mall-rat and a café fixture. She had got into a few scrapes, involving minor theft and school truancy and various fender-bending peccadilloes driving around in cars, but as she spoke, cockily buffing up her misadventurous side, he more or less could see that, assuming that a shortcut is the longest distance between two points, her high-school grades had been for a time actually quite good and that with some determination or a push in the right direction she might have gone a lot further.

Apparently she went out just about every night in her senior year, drinking screwtop wine, driving intoxicated, and staying out until all hours. "I drank tons, buttloads of warm piss in cans, never bottles," she exclaimed, giggling. "Beer was my gateway drug. It was definitely a hand-me-a-glass-of-oblivion type thing. I totaled my father's Plymouth Volare one night and then drove a rusted-out 1978 Ford F150 shitbox

that I bought for sixty-five bucks. Another time drinking with a pimply guy named Colin, a megadick—doesn't every drip on the planet have that name? —I got toasted and sheered off the whole back of a red motorbike which happened to be his. He went wolfshitz! What an asshat! I thought he was going to throttle me, I swear to God. Remember that weird fable you told me the other night about that Sat Sun Mon, the Chinese butcher who went nuts and chased his domineering mother in a fit of dementia and crazy-legged the poor bitch with a cleaver? I thought that was me." She shrugged. "I wasn't one of those kids in the early grades who had 'explosive deficit disorder' who threw desks at teachers. Hey, but I never went in either for all that 'Drink Your School, Stay in Drugs, Don't Do Milk' horseshit that all of us had to listen to back in the Seventies, OK? I was—out of line." She burst into self-mocking laughter. "This just in, folks!" She bent forward hysterically laughing. "I was basically a social misfit."

"None of that classic note thing in class, 'Do you like me? Circle YES / NO / MAYBE'?" asked Eugene.

"What would that have got me? A one-way ticket to Loserville. I used sit around and watch television all afternoon, WTVH-TV in Syracuse. Movies, cartoons, anything. Nobody cared. I stayed up half the night watching shows. I watched TV all the time. Wolfing potato chips. Jacked up on Jolt Cola. Chewing Bubblicious. I loved Joe Bob Briggs and all that creature-feature shit. When I got bored, I used to hang around in the square with a few of the really tough girls in my area. 'Hey, Shqumball, wanna get squasted?' my girlfriend Weezie used to shout under my window, she was half nuts, and we did—we got drunk all the time. At one point we had so many empty Genesee beer cans rolling around the back of her ass-old 1966 Dodge Polara that when she took a corner the whole goddamn car rattled! Sometimes we'd go and sit all night under a railroad bridge by the trestle drinking Ny-Quil Stingers with vodka and when it rained she looked like a fucking wet rat. We used to jump out of trees in our underwear and give ourselves atomic wedgies! She was double-jointed, left notes with eyeliner, did mushrooms, spray-painted walls with cans of Dupo, and told the most outrageous lies with a straight face." She coughed with laughter. "We talked about going to clown college. We used to rip open packs of cherry-flavored Jello-O, dip our wet fingers in it, rub it on our lips for a nice I-just-kissed-all-night stain, and then walk around downtown like king shit. She used to call herself Zadfrack from Zooberg and

would go totally stoned to these 'boxer parties,' legalized date rape, where both sexes all had to attend wearing only underwear. Three fries short of a Happy Meal, right?" She laughed and shrugged. "We were partners in bitch crime, what can I tell you. For real! We used to pull a lot of chew-and-screw jobs in restaurants—scarf down a meal, check for clearance, then skip out without paying. Mostly we did it when we were toasted. There was a period there on weekends when we were knocking down so many Midori Sours we'd have to go down to the river and barf. Nobody liked us, which was fine, because we didn't like anybody either. Me and Sister Midnight. I used to call her that. And Fire Girl. We hated the asshole cheerleaders who were nothing but plastic fabrikoid bitches and we would go driving around all night half-shellacked, cracking ammonium nitrate capsules and whipping around real late in order to egg their houses." A cold note entered her voice. "I remember those cheerleaders. I remember them all, each one—their faces. Every last one of them." Laura confessed that by using alcohol she had hoped to lower her defenses and somehow seep into some guy's, anyone's, affections. She looked at Eugene slyly sideways and said, "Some nights I never came home."

"Did you meet anybody?"

She smiled, pulling her hair over her mouth to flirt with her eyes, but said nothing.

"Someone who loved you?"

"That a chill shot?" she asked with glacial matter-of-factness.

"Not at all."

"Special?" she queried.

"Yes."

"Kind of obvious not," said Laura, shrugging and sinking lower in her seat. "I was pale and pimply and geekishly tall and avoided the sun worse than bleach-o Joni Mitchell! I told you, in high school all the so-called über-hot chicks who I knew and liked-slash-hated back then were complete bitches. I remember the worst of them—skunks like Ella Mae Coon, Scary Susan, Hairy Mary Butler, Jamie Chickencoop, Julia Straightfat who sculpted. They used to call me Lurch and Chicken Legs and Pinocchio and Scumbag and The Human Flavor-Straw and amused themselves in class passing around ugly cartoons of me and notes like '370HSSV 0773H' with my name written underneath, which you had to read upside-down and backwards"—Laura quickly scribbled it out on a pad—"get it?" But I told you all that shit before.

She swallowed hard. "Skeeves." She wilted in a kind of resigned anger. "I was the fucking victim of secrets, lies, glares, gossip, curses, and clique derision." As she spoke, she seemed to be conversing with her own solitude and interrogating the very thing she had become. "My hair which was crazy I changed all the time, I admit it, stack-permed or ratted, which was one of the things that gave people the idea I was weird. I used to set my hair on those big wacko orange-juice-can-sized rollers! Marathon blow-dries! It was pathetic. I was always fiending for a look I never found. I learned how to make blue eye-shadow out of matches. I'd slather on all this globulaceous eye-shadow and wet, fruit-flavored lip-gloss redder than a stoplight!" She popped in a stick of gum. "Me and Twelve, another friend, used to go to these concerts, maybe drive around, you know, hang out here and there, but we were nothing, nobody, just lunchmeat, like I mean *tooootal* losers, OK?" Her thoughts came not symphonically but rather by accumulation, an odd gallimaufry of semi-related thoughts and afterthoughts. "We put on doll makeup and flex leotards and sometimes big wedges with ankle-socks. We stuffed our bras and wore colored jelly bracelets—blue meant oral, black with a condom, red without. You know?—and even faux-fagged." She was laughing hysterically. "We did sarcastic claps—slow and snarky—at groups of boy tricks we drove by and would scream out 'Robots!' We tried out women's toys and took naps in furniture stores and smoked pipes and spent whole afternoons on the telephone gotcha-calling all the teachers that we hated," Laura shrugged. "As I say, we watched a lot of TV, I liked the Bionic Woman"—she stretched out a stringlet of gum, lifted it, then gnashed it—"who made that cool noise when she ran?" She shrugged. "We became *Dark Shadows* fanatics in middle school and watched it like clockwork eating brittle-hunks every afternoon with two gay kids we knew who had memorized hundreds of episodes. For a while there all of us were pretending we lived in—our room *was*—Barnabas's living room!" She turned to him.

Eyestones just drove.

"Look, you asked," she laughed.

"No, I didn't."

"You'll have to grin and bear it."

"I find the two rarely go together."

Again Laura dolefully reported in short polemics often given with explosive disgust that her parents, hating each other, cared neither about her or her sisters and never had, and so she asked with her own

kind of pretzel logic why she herself should care? She admitted she confided nothing to her parents — only lied to them. Eyestones was not surprised at her deceptions. Wasn't that a football coach's main rule: always move the launch point of a quarterback? It was not so much that Laura did not heed any of the household rules, as apparently there were none, not even after she headed off to college, which for her amounted to little more than a few conceptual painting and art-history courses forgotten or ignored in subsequent years, jobless and feckless and unplanned, a descent into a kind of water-wipeout where she just drifted and without will in the indeterminate but enveloping scurf.

"I was rebellious," she said, folding her arms and yawning at Philadelphia.

"I would encourage that," Eugene responded, trying to encourage her. "I believe it's a sign of health. Most of the time. In colonial days, when the average lifespan was forty-seven, half the population was under the age of seventeen. No wonder there was a revolutionary spirit at the time." He looked at her. "Do you know what I mean?" But Laura who had yawned again merely looked away and was whistling, Maureen McGovern's "Midnight Storm." It was interesting: like all autocentric people, Laura never ever considered that anyone else, never mind Eugene, might also be rebellious or problematic or energized by the heterodox or the wild or, using herself as the measure, even the mildly different. She who lived alone in a room that was not exactly the Galleria Vittoria Emmanuelle in Milan was addicted to her trouble. She had stored up all her slights and hurts and rejections—the guys who whizzed past her in cars and shouted curses at her, the guys who took her for rides and thrust their hands up her Olive Oyl skirt, the guys who let her blow them and then kicked her out of their cars—all the while nailing her life to the certainty that someday, somehow, basically by trading upward—who knew?—she would meet someone who would save her. It never once occurred to her that she either should or even could do it on her own.

Addiction, Eyestones realized, is often a choice—people choosing their own behavior. He wondered about himself. Why was he himself with Laura Warholic? What about his own behavior in being with the very kind of person who would prompt such a reflection? Was there in his concern, grotesquely, a reproduction of mothering? Wasn't to dissimulate merely to feign not to have what one in fact has? Was he

not blind? Did he not see with stone eyes? Perception is not impartial, he certainly saw, but proceeds from a center. Was he not stubbornly his own center? In the way, say, that rain seems to happen when there's pain, *our* pain making the rain, can't we admit most of the world is centered on ourselves? If veracity consists broadly in believing according to evidence, in the absence of truth, doesn't self-deception often prevail over right reason and even moral insight? Isn't it common for the rich to maintain that it is pleasant to be poor? Don't healthy people insist that all illness is self-indulgence? Don't matadors argue that the bull enjoys being gored? Riflemen, that deer cooperate? Fox-hunters, that the fox likes being chased into a hole and devoured by dogs?

After a few days, by the time they reached Pennsylvania, it crossed Eyestones's mind to do a turnaround and head back. Laura became tiresome. He found her negative about the best auto routes, which radio stations were tolerable, the vast distances. Their discussions caromed from her love of malls to her intense dislike of her parents—like most women her age Laura wanted to define herself by not becoming her mother—to the contorted leg under her that fell asleep to her glaring lack of friends. In an Amish restaurant somewhere out between the buggy country of Lancaster and York, eating corn soup between slurps, she went on about Gayle, her so-called enemy/friend, whom she paradoxically supported between unambiguous putdowns, vilified in the midst of praise, turning information as a weapon as she reported woeful story after woeful story of her friend's marital capitulation—this became a mantra of hers—and about her own five years in San Francisco and the awfulness of her ex-husband Warholic, his cheapness, his crudeness, his Jewishness, his bullying, and his cruelty. "I was afraid of him and his fucking temper, 'veiners' I called them, raging tantrums when the veins in his forehead popped out and his face turned purple. Do you know what a bustard is, a big fat fucking bird with a high beak and a crest on its head? I used to see them at the Bronx Zoo. Well, Warholic was both a bustard *and* a bastard! I should have shot him and buried his body in a goat pen."

"A what?"

"We have them in Wampsville. He threw things. He once ripped an entire cabinet out of the wall in the apartment," said Laura matter-of-factly, chewing gum, always chewing gum, gnashing it: *moritz schlick, moritz schlick.* But Eugene, who knew about things like vindictiveness and the evolution of evidence, was not quite sure which of the two

was worse. "I hated that bastard even when he was pawing me. His lips used to leave a disgusting wet place on my neck." She claimed that even though he was on welfare, he wanted her to work to support him. An anticorporate sentiment had begun to prevail in her nonversation. During their extended traveling time together he could see that she was a drama queen, to some degree something of a manipulator, something he hadn't noticed the first months he had known her. She hadn't the power of being pretty and knew it, but what he took to be her furled appearance, mere walking incompetence, all along hid what with extreme force was a scheming, on-the-make desperado who was truly and continuously pissed off at the world.

Although in high school Laura mistook attention for affection, when, like most young women her age, she woke up with chagrin after a few guys coldly humped her and dumped her, meeting Warholic became the watershed of all the suspicion and hostility she kept like a grouchbag in her soul. "I don't trust anyone. Definitions define limits, right?" she declared in Delaware while rolling down the window to throw out her gum. "What would you like to eat?" asked Eugene in the heavy traffic of the Beltway. Total silence. "Laura?" "What?" "What would you like to eat?" She was not sure. She was not ready to decide. They swung off into Washington DC to eat. They were not fussy and stopped at Go-Lo's, a small Chinese restaurant at 604 H Street NW, which in the course of dinner they happened to learn was the site of Mrs. Surratt's Boarding House, site of the Lincoln assassination conspiracy. It seemed somehow symbolic of their long trip that summer that a unique historical spot in America had turned into a place to buy fish-ball foon, dumplings, and bags of lychee nuts.

After the Decoy Museum in Havre de Grace, Maryland ("Is this the real museum or a fake one?" asked Eugene of the curator, trying to be funny), Laura announced, slumping down in the car, that out-of-the-way places did not interest her. "That's so *had*!" she cracked, and adding "Dork stops!" went to the ladies' room and stayed for half an hour. It was characteristic of her.

She was never ready, and when they had to return to a motel in Sharpsburg, Maryland, to look for an expensive pair of sunglasses she had left behind, delaying them an hour, Eugene thought ruefully of General Burnside at Antietam in 1863, whose hesitations in that battle cost the Union dearly. Union, he smiled. Eugene and Laura. Laurel, crown of victory. Crown of victory? Wreath of defeat!

Delaware was sulking, Virginia petulant, and west of that was a desultory cross between the two. At Wilmington they ate at Minato's Japanese Restaurant, a tiny boite at 101 W. 8th Street with a great reputation—"Want some gooey rice cakes?" asked Laura, smirking—and then they stopped at Auntie Tasoon's to have her famous iced tea made with guava. For no reason other than it was the town in the U.S. with the longest name, they went out of their way to drive through Winchester-on-the-Severn in Maryland where Laura, rolling up the window against the gritty electric smell of rain against dust, complained out of absolutely nowhere—connecting grievances?—that when he went to San Diego once, five days went by when he never wrote to her. Then they headed south into the warm "cousin" states—West Virginia, the Carolinas, and Arkansas—where predominated the highest percentage of Americans who describe barbeque as the essential aroma that best defined the country. They drove through the Land of the Cherokee Nation now called Tennessee by the people who stole and renamed it. Laura angrily inquired what had he been doing in San Diego during those five days that made it so impossible to write to her? Although in earlier days Eugene had once walked more than sixty windswept miles across the open tundra to Shaktoolik, Alaska, and fought battles at Dak To and Tuy Hoa and once climbed Mount Shasta, nothing, he would swear, was as big a task as being with Laura, who needed a cup of coffee every four minutes, constantly had to pee, got bored quickly, quizzed him about trivia regarding other women, and very often found little or nothing to like in the matter of food. "I'd rather have a Scaltrissimo's ripper," she'd complain. "Or eat at Lump Sum's. Why don't they have a Yee Hong Guey's around here, or a Wun Dum Fuk's?" "A Wun Dum Fuk's?" asked Eugene incredulously, crossing the mountains, "*in War, West Virginia*?"

They were generally patient and congenial with one other, except for all the times that they were cold, indifferent, manipulative, and felt like killing each other. Although she was moody, every once in a while Laura brightened. Between times her expression would retreat to one of blank martyrdom, what Eugene called the "Missing Formation" look. He would try to confront her at such times in order to outface folly, like the King of Thrace who famously broke exquisite presents on purpose so that they could not be broken by accident. She was earnest in every state. Oh how immune to irony she was! "Be alert," Eugene would say, chiding her. "The country needs more lerts." They fought,

they argued, but they always made up, usually coincident with Eugene telling her a story such as Hans Christian Andersen's *Snow Queen* or Edward Ardizzone's *Lucy Brown and Mr. Grimes*—stories that he had memorized as a boy and she liked to hear—or reciting one of the long narrative ballads he liked such as "The Fall of Tecumseh," "The Cremation of Sam McGee," and "Why Are You Weeping, Sister?" or spinning for her one of his own invented-on-the-spot fables about terrifying Mr. Eldritch who had a paper head; or Nothingface the Monster; or O-Face, the Flatulent Bulgarian; or Mother Menace; or Captain Glasspack and His Magic Mufflers; or the Reverend Canaan Banana of Zimbabwe who sold voodoo dolls to all of his parishioners; or Morder, Lord of Darkness; or Flashfire, the Man with Footsoles of Wind; or the Facialfist Brothers; or Klafooti, the Daisy-Kutter Killer; or Mr. Carpo, the Man Who Played Fruit Machines to Predict the Future; or Queen Gloriana the Viper; or Roc, the Brazilian oil painter and lunatic who stabbed people with knives fashioned out of newspapers, water, and sugar—sagas all of them, with ongoing episodes that Laura waited for, becoming almost addicted, when she snuggled up to him with her head on his heart as he talked. Her love of—her need for—seeing things seemed at times part of her skepticism. Sight to some degree lessened her mistrust. She appeared to him like a beleaguered woman with barbed wire over her eyes, sight-blasted, captured by a freedomless fate, someone wounded as to sight. He himself, who had had a third eye operation and had been afflicted for almost seven years with a cataract on his left eye that required a series of needling operations, understood that, understood that well.

In a good mood Laura could be easy to be with. She still went into deep funks and silences as the weeks passed, and was always running out of money and having to stop at local ATMs, parsimoniously—with her back turned—withdrawing cash in small, discrete increments of $10.00, and constantly wanting cups of coffee at all hours of the day and night. "I gotta have my 'midnight,' Loopy Doopy," she would declare, styling by rolling her shoulders. "I need my cup of joe." "Get me my 'blackout.'" Sometimes she would adopt a mopey voice. "I don't want to go, I'll wait in the car, I haven't had my morning coffee." "I give you more attention than Chasuble gives his poodle, Oinky the Porkchop," Eugene would complain, frustratedly shaking his head, half-joking, half-serious. Conversation even on good days was often only bat and catch. Most of the time, frankly, it required a consider-

able amount of determined allowance-making and creative inattention on his part simply to see a day through next to her without wanting to drop her off at the closest bus station and continue the trip alone. Once she got a bad haircut, which he criticized. "You want a person to be perfect," accused Laura. "No, I don't," he laughed. "You do." "I don't. I do not." "You want me to be like that old movie star Louise Brooks who you're always talking about. You and fucking Louise Brooks! I'm sick of her! Louise Brooks this, Louise Brooks that!'I love her haircut!'!" "Nobody's perfect. Isn't that why Marilyn Monroe had just the tiniest blemish right"—and leaning over to her, he delicately tapped the tip of an index finger to a precise spot just above Laura's clavicle on the left-center of her neck—"there?" "A person has to be a goddamn diva for you," charged Laura. "That is ridiculous," said Eugene. "I admire Betsy Drake. No one ever talks about her, right? Have you seen *Every Girl Should Be Married*? Was *she* perfect? She had a lisp and pronounced her *s*s like *f*s."

"I know who she is. She was married to Cary Grant," snorted Laura. "They were mismatched."

"So are the towers of Chartres, aren't they?" *So are we*, he thought. "And aren't they lovely? Jennifer Jones, a true beauty and one of my all-time favorite actresses until I read about how she betrayed her husband, Robert Walker, and sold her soul to David O-for-Empty Selznick merely to get a few choice parts, had a case of slushy diction, if you listen closely. 'I'm *trasch*, I tell ya, I'm *trasch*,' she tells Charles Bickford in *Duel in the Sun*. A sort of slush-at-the-side-of-the-mouth problem. I like all kinds of women. I adore Joan Leslie, who I don't think anyone even knows anymore, never mind mentions. To many she seemed plain. Not a perfect dancer, no, not at all, but to me she was everything. Up there with favorites of mine like Peggy Dow, Eleanor Powell, and Vera Zorina. She cared, she was brave, she loved, she had intensity, she understood desire. When in *The Sky's the Limit* pilot Fred Astaire flies off to war, one of the most unforgettable moments in all movies is that final heart-stopping closeup of Joan Leslie whispering . . . what? A prayer? A vow? A declaration of love?"

Came a silence.

"Well, *what*?"

"But that's the point. You never know."

Laura glowered and opened a stick of gum. "What *is* desire?"

"My definition is—" Eugene suddenly thought of Jennifer Jones as

Jane Hilton in *Since You Went Away*: so gentle, loyal, beautiful, kind, and optimistic, and, forgetting the real person she was, sadly looked over to Laura. "My definition is, one person always wants the other more."

"Another one of your famous Eyestonesisms, right?" said Laura, chawnking her gum with an occasional slurp. "'Our dreams are our temptations.' 'Husbands marry to be silent, women marry to talk.' 'Men use love to get sex, women use sex to get love.' 'One person always desires the other more.' 'Adolescent love is the strongest love of all.' 'Scenes in airports constitute in our society the most vivid dramas of love.' 'Americans who can't comprehend the concept of queuing have no qualms about clogging up a crowded aisle.' 'All states with *o*s in their name are hick-states and have the fewest book-readers.' 'The longer we live, the more we realize we have to die.' 'The absence of evidence is not necessarily the evidence of absence.' 'All this evil'—wait, wait, wait." She impatiently snap-snap-snapped her fingers to hasten recollection. "Oh yeah, 'All this evil'"—and joining in unison Laura and Eugene both sang together, "'*because two people ate an apple in Mesopotamia!*'" They laughed. She continued. "'Every time an old man dies, a library closes.' 'Thirty-year-old women all begin to imagine—' what was that one?"

Why was she so bitter? he wondered.

"Oh yes, de Clerambault's syndrome or however it's pronounced, that's right. When women in their thirties, the age when they are most commonly the victims of this strange, extreme condition, for some reason, out of some terrible anxiety actually begin to believe that they are involved in great love affairs that are *entirely imaginary!* They even go so far as to plan weddings, showers, honeymoons. Pure deludinoids! The one idea revolves in their heads like a BB in a boxcar! It's a tragedy."

When they were not discussing movies and music—contemporary to her, of course—she had little to say. Was she facing a thousand contextless absolutes and therefore lost in what she could not discern in order to say? As they rode, she kept twiddling the car-radio dial for something she liked, then calibrating it like a safecracker whenever she found something she did. Over and over again she kept coming back to the subject of bands. She was one of those people who trekked to rock concerts and stood there amid swaying crowds all night, pop-eyed and dangle-jawed in a trance of wonder and delight, bouncing up and down and repeatedly waving her arms with an index-finger raised, a

peculiarity—it was so sadly conformist—that never failed to bewilder Eyestones whose own father's single bit of advice to him the day he headed off to high school was, "Get to know the odd ones. They will be doing the really interesting things in life." Eugene heard her rock stories in silence. The silence that Laura took as critical made her defensive. "I don't know. It was happening," she said. "I liked the music most."

"Nothing wrong with that. So do I. It was the slow movement in Brahms' third quartet that pulled Wittgenstein from the brink of self-destruction."

"Who's Wittgenstein?"

No, music was about the only thing they had in common, but it is a wide net.

From the time she was around fifteen, the worst time for a girl to be neglected, especially by her father—all fires start small—Laura had been going with all kinds of raised expectations, taking a girlfriend with her, to a number of those mad, crowd-crazed, deindividuating rock concerts with a pink, big-handled comb and a cigarette lighter to wave in the air. She was a Cheap Trick fanatic, a bubblegum-group that, as he got it, pretty much became her religion, the only one she had. It was her essential sacramental. Her dubious association with them became permanent in her mind. She kept repeating that she was their "mystery girl."

"Oh my god, I love this song," squealed Laura, turning up the radio.

> If you want my love, you got it,
> If you need my love, you got it,
> I won't hurt it,
> I won't blow your love awaaaaay,
> Ooooooooooooooo!

"What are *you* doing?"

"I'm pulling off the road," said Eugene, who could not believe the high-decibel howling on the radio. "It's raining pitchforks and hoe-handles out there." They were in the middle of nowheresville, land flat to the eye.

"We're just going to sit here?"

"You keep talking about Cheap Trick. Go ahead and finish. I'm

listening." He slumped down. "I'm tired of driving in this deluge. My eyes hurt."

"To me they invented rock 'n' roll."

He looked at her in astonishment.

"Invented it?"

She prune-faced him, adding sarcastic finger-snapping as applause.

"That's what I said."

"*Invented* it?"

"You got it, Doodle Bug!"

"Interesting," said Eugene, laughing and poking her stomach, "because I have an old 78 rpm Decca by Doles Dickens and His Quintet, number #48LOB, entitled 'Rock and Roll,' it has great sax riffs—the flip side is 'Hold Me Baby'—which even predates Alan Freed, who supposedly popularized the term sometime around 1953 or 1954."

She yawned.

"What?"

"You were talking."

"About my first Cheap Trick concert?"

"Right."

"I was sitting with my girlfriend in the front row on that big night. I remember I was wearing jellyfish sandals, my girlfriend, Twelve, who was a wicked slut, wore like a pair of mesh slides and tight jeans. Oh, and Juicy body-wash!" Laura was in enthralled. "We were drinking Colorado Kool-Aid and stuff that a guy gave us! Christ! We were both wearing these sharp red baseball caps with Trick buttons all over it and T-shirts showing Rick, Tom, Bun E.—the drummer Bun E. Carlos, you know?—and Robin. Robin Zander! I was like so wicked in love with that guy! Long blond hair. Cleft chin. So beyond adorable. A snack! Lunchable! Horny goatweed to the max! See, I used to like stud-muffin Dennis DeYoung of Styx more, when I was thirteen, but that night it was all Robin, and I mean bumpin' like a mug and making me sweat like a ballpark frank!" brightly added Laura. She was positively beaming. "Me and my girlfriend actually used to write to them. Cheap Trick, 315 West Gorham Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53703. I still remember!" *Were they giving IQ tests that night?* Eugene wanted to ask. "There were these tight white pants Robin used to wear. Robin wore tightie whities!" she marveled, leaning back. "And his eyes? Were this amazing kind of green? In that majorly, like, sleep-sexy way?" Ques-

tions to Laura were, queerly, her answers. "The drummer's always the one in a group who should be cute," she said, "and like, I don't know, Bun E. was just that, you know? The others were fucking Andys. I was stoked. Up close meant a lot! Sitting way back sucked monkeys. And why? We could identify all the knobs of the guys in the band," she boasted, and lewdly scratched Eugene's knee. "And oh my God Robin *ruled!* Their debut album? 1977. Pretty excellent! *Pretty* excellent? Fucking totally awesome! Slenching! Huge!" She took out and mowsed a stick of gum. "Great tunes like 'Lovin' Money,' 'Surrender,' 'Maxin' and Relaxin'.' What's the matter, Sugar Cookie, am I getting too sappy for you? Like too emo?" she asked with pop-eyes, a particular look that Laura often adopted after asking an unexpected question that when made with her wide ears gave her the look of a bush baby. It was positively amazing to Eyestones. Groupiedom fit her like air in a jug.

"Emo?"

"Sentimental, try," scoffed Laura, laughing out of her isinglass eyes. "Get your freak on!" She pulled a knuckle. "But really, it's true, I was *wicked* in love with him. Gotta tell ya, Tiger Paws! Still am!" It was more than a smile: her mouth grew wide as a seagull's. "So we're at the concert, right? In boss seats like you wouldn't believe? It was total insanity. Totally O.T.T! You can take out some of those totallys if you like," she added. "But I was like wigging. So it's hot as hell with these humongous lights overhead? And crowded? Like from hell? And I'm wicked fucking cranked?" Laura had the irritating habit, common among her generation, of throwing out a whole series of declarative statements in the form of questions, repeatedly made, that with a querulous lilt at the end of each managed to solicit agreement by way of doubt! "So what happens? At one point, I shit you not, Robin Zander looks directly from the stage at me and I'm like totally freaking, OK? I was like *whoaa!* You'll think I'm making this up," she said, closing her eyes and swaying in an unconvincing facsimile of joy, "but I'm freaking out. I had goosebumps—like my party hats were on display! Some kind of wonderful. The thing is he couldn't miss us, not with our hats and Trick buttons and we were holding up a sign that we made on which we wrote 143. Get it? It's beeper-speak. *I* one number, *love* four numbers, *you* three numbers. *I love you!*" She excitedly turned to Eugene with those wide red gums of hers and a sort of pseudoephedrine grin. "And screaming? We were wrecking shop! I waited after the show and wanted to go backstage wicked and I even tried—are you

awake?—but my girlfriend of course said no, you know, like from curfew, maybe her father was waiting or something? I forget, but I'm like no fucking way, tackhead! Go *home?* When this was my big chance? I'm like no way, fuck that, the stakes were too big." Eugene looked at her small, white, relatively animated face. He could not quite believe it. As she went on and on, she was alive and smiling with that wide sardonic mouth, as sunny and brainless as forsythia. Her nose wagged as she talked, and you could tell by the crow's-feet that were now wrinkling her face even so young, those fruitwood lines around her eyes, what she would become within a decade, as though premapping a pattern of the forties and fifties face.

"Want to know something? I shouldn't tell you this, but that night I tried to steal Robin's stage-jacket, just snag it the way Courtney Love--?" She paused. "Of Hole?" she asked. "Hello, are you there? The way Courtney snatched Ian McCulloch's, of Echo and the Bunnymen, after he, what, 'rebuffed her advances,' as they say in movie magazines. Are you awake? It was *so* Courtney!" It was difficult for Eugene to believe that this was a thirty-five-year-old woman speaking. Why did he feel such a desperate urge to turn around and drive back home?

There is always a barjack beside a barracuda, felt Eugene. It was harmless, he supposed. But as he listened, he delved deeper into the crevices of his own private thoughts, recalling by painful comparison a young girl half Laura's age with twice her kindness who was part of his life and had lived in his mind all these long years: lovely Snow, who at different times drove a cyclo or tuk-tuk through the desperate humidity of Saigon to earn a living, but mostly walked. It was concentrating on her that made the listening easy. He rolled down the window to feel the rain on his face and only pitied Laura for her fecklessness. Nuygen Thi Ba. Snow. An orphan is the only pilgrim. "Happiness is wanting to be nobody."

"Anyway, I got Robin's athletic cup later by way of a cop friend of my mother's which is still in my apartment and now keep my pocket change in it. Fantastic, right? When I got out on the street with it, like I didn't yell? It was the *sha-reek* of the century!" As he understood it, Laura owned every album of theirs that they ever made of course and said that she also had a Cheap Trick promo security-sticker, a Dream Police tourbook, and a used songlist with a ticket she said she had bought for $75.00. "*And* I own the cardboard Japanese 'Oh Boy'

instrumental of theirs on a picture disc. Eat your heart out, Numb Nose," she said. "They're collectibles."

"I'm too impressed to speak," he laughed. But she was now skrawkily singing,

> "Shine up my old brown shoes
> Put on a brand new shirt
> Get home early from work
> Just to say that you love me.
> I want you to want me
> I need you to need me
> I'd love you to love me."

She rolled down the car window and leaned back. "I know the 45 rpm number of that single, so well—number ZSS 164961—but, not only that, I can tell you precisely how long it takes for the record to play: exactly three minutes and thirty-eight seconds." She tapped her watch-face.

"How do you know?"

A sly-boots look came into her risible eyes. "I fucked a few guys to it, Ratzkywatzky," she said, smiling with closed eyes. "We timed it." She snapped her fingers and began rhythmically bobbing her head from side to side. "Stylin', right?"

> "Didn'tIdidn'tIdidn'tIdidn'tI
> Didn'tIdidn'tdidn'tIdldn'tI?"

she sang. "Like it? You've heard it, right? I sing in the key of A—that's Patti Smith's key."

"What a voice," said Eugene.

The ardor that Laura showed was not only for the pop group; it was an example of what psychiatrists call "anticipatory coping," Eyestones knew, the prepubescent need by shouting and display to try out a sexuality yet to emerge, which was normal enough, but the revisionist fancy, the nostalgia for the past, the lonely, homely girl's insistent rewishing of old dreams seemed so odd in someone so much older. To what those dreams were he had no direct access, simply because she mistrusted questions by the very nature of their being asked and merely took to own, not share, but even as they sat there, even while she

reviewed a happy memory, her coy, yet predaceous manner masked nothing of her discontent, as perhaps she thought it did, for he could feel under her playful insults and sarcasm and exaggerated and deadly compliments the strain of a continuous and furious resentment. Laura said, "But that was just a crush on Robin Zander. Now you're my favorite, right?"

Eugene, who knew about sarcasm, did not need to look over to check whether Laura was smirking.

Driving through the night, noticing not only that the front of the Big Dipper pointed to the North Star but that the handle of the Little Dipper did as well, he found a motel near Gibsonton, Florida (the famed "Gibton"), way out there on lonesome Highway 41, a circus town with "residential show-biz zoning" that was the home of so-called freaks, marginal people of various sizes and shapes, oddities and ontologies, dreams and differences. Fates we are given, concluded Eyestones, but then were fates freedoms? He walked outside and questioned the skies as Laura finished bathing. A strange beautiful vagalume opened and closed overhead, a wandering light playing a game in a part of eternity.

"So, Bunny Slippers, where's my story?"

Obliging Laura, Eugene went in, snapped off the light in the room, climbed onto the bed—not in it—with her, fixed a pillow for her head, and told her the following story, wondering all the while, in recounting it, if the reflected fable of escape was something he should have heeded himself.

XXVI
Queen Gloriana's Revenge

Queen Gloriana of Albion, seventy-eight years old, was an imperious and domineering crotchstick of unexampled ugliness who, although having been married four times, remained nevertheless sex-mad, a matter at her age more of vanity than of passion, and every chance she got she sought to gratify herself by making—or trying to make—assignations with likely young men throughout the kingdom. It was the year 1478. One particular morning, rising on white silk pillows, she yanked the bell-pull and with her snap-quack voice ordered Wheeldex, her servant, immediately to come to the inner chamber. She explained that she had dreamt of music and now knew the reason why. "Last night at the banquet there was dancing and a troubadour," she said. "Who was that lovely mandolin player?"

"It was young Vaillancourt," replied her servant, bowing deeply and setting down before her a silver spoon and a vacherin of berries and meringue. She gobbled it up and clapped her hands for her pet hyena, Slutswool.

She was often bored. She collected valuable old perfumes in bottles and fashioned dumb art boxes with trifles placed in them. She wrote crapulous poems that everyone had to like in order to keep his job. Whims dominated her aesthetic. In the past, she had posted offers of large rewards throughout the realm that never came to anything, for, farcically, anyone who could create a blue food, devise an instrument to see through walls, model a sculpture that did not touch the ground. Her taste was exquisitely artificial. Fame was her sole fixation, to appear young her obsession. People in their obsessions can be terrifying. The trouble is, there is something dehumanizing about any sort of addiction. On this morning she arose, flung on a robe, and strode

imperiously through her vast candlelit, round-glass-object-strewn rooms with pounds of rejuvenating makeup on her crumbling old face recharged with a sudden scheme to have fulfilled a lot of new fantasies in the coming night. Several times that handsome young mandolinist had smiled at her. Out of preening self-regard she was utterly convinced in her juiceless near-dotage that he, like everyone, loved and adored her. Emotions have nothing to do with intellect. In the cloud-boil of the queen's mind, she was the center of the world. Many times a year (so the byword went) painters summoned to the castle to fix her portraits had to err in their reproductions on the side not of truth but of fantasy. Wheeldex was ordered that minute to invite young Vaillancourt to the castle. "And tell him to bring his instrument," she declared sniggering, who failed to know his heart was pure. Nodding assent, Wheeldex, who set down her pet, scooted out to tell his wife, the cook, but felt a sense of dread. It was well known that the queen could be very ugly when fallible.

Queen Gloriana's cruelty was legend. If you crossed the woman, she simply made you disappear. It was well known that, hard upon the very week of being crowned, she had killed her four indefeasibly stupid brothers, rivals who, each one colder and more ambitious than the next, had all been scheming against her, in recompense whereof she had all of them locked into a tower with a starving Komodo dragon, and the next morning only a single femur and a bloody swatch of hair or two was found to document their brief existence. About her four husbands, very like the four shipwrecks of Saint Paul, about which incidentally the Holy Scripture, queerly, provides the details of only one (Acts 27:27-44), nobody in the realm knew a thing, except that all had been beheaded but the last, a weak ineffectual herbert who before he died from a brain aneurysm had given her two charmless sons, one of whom toward his late teens threw himself off a cliff after a furious argument with his mother who in an attempt to learn more of a well-formed schoolmate of his had been plying him with wine. She banished the other son, a sad cripple named Faucetwater, who for his indisposition posed no threat. He took a job as a gravedigger. The Queen's heart was ice-cold. It was within neither her scope nor her interest to suffer fools. To extreme situations, to paraphrase Pascal, one must apply extreme remedies. Much of life is about what is missing.

Such as freedom, for example.

The poor townsfolk there in all the verges of the valley lived in poverty and were considered nothing but chattel to the castle. They swinged flax, ground wheat, churned butter, carded wool, chamfered wood, pressed curds, flensed blubber, cut wood, tanned leather, melted tallow, beat hemp, and braided seed corn. *Autres temps, autre mœurs.*

Now it was a beautiful moonlit night when young Vaillancourt was brought to the castle in a carriage, appearing again at court to play his mandolin, sing ballads, and

pluck the strings to create salvation. But his music did nothing to allay the amorousness it aroused. A feast took place while the queen devised her plan. At midnight, after her dwarf Gropequeynt had tumbled for them and Creeple balanced ninepins and Spotted Marcel bum-walked along a cord and Dick Brodhead the eunuch sang "*Die Nachtigall*" dressed in a bird costume while fluttering his wings, Queen Gloriana ate a winkle off a pin, looked over to where the troubadour sat, and lickerously thought *I want to suck his lovely ears*. An endless array of unnatural acts occurred to her. She had love-whips, bumfeathers, scent-fans. Raising her shiny goblet, which held the cunning reflection of her face, her tongue resting lewdly on her lip, she rose in a wild wobble, walked across the gold room, and whispered to him, "A whole hour has gone by, and you have not kissed me yet." She lewdly flutter-tongued the *t*. All the servants with their Chaucerian common sense swapped knowing glances. Given a turn, the young man hesitated and with something of humor, generally the enemy of infatuation, to say nothing of passion, could only reply, but not uncharitably, "I . . . I do not even know you, your Majesty."

The Queen coldly stared at him. "I see," she stated with accusatory precision, repeating "I see" as she walked back to her throne. Her tall, awkward frame launched up, with her head thrust forward like a crane, misbalanced from shock unsteadily on vestigial legs that seemed to have lost their sense of direction through long disuse. Her fingernails were reptilian. "I see." The beginning is indeed half the whole.

Not that she gave up. Encouraged to sleep over, Vaillancourt was given a large bed in a remote stone-chamber in the dismal, which he shared, he couldn't help but notice, with chained Slutswool, a beast who glowered at him all through the night. Was he being guarded? That sleepless night he offered up to the Blessed Virgin.

Meanwhile, the queen, having redreamed hours about him there alone in that room, suddenly appeared in person in the darkness carrying sweetcakes, two bottles of wine, and, to fill in the corners, as was often said with satisfaction, a large bowl filled with Montepulciano plums. The woman was stark naked. Her face was slathered cream-shiny in order to look young and fresh, her teeth were long and hideous, and her wide-nostriled nose, shiny with luciflects, provided the only light. She believed she was enduringly young. She had always had her way. Her wealth and power had blinded her to all folly. She poured the wine, shaking bubbles from her fingers over the sweetcakes that were filled with rum currants, for she loved strong flavors and was one of those dyspeptics who drenched her food with truffle sauce. She set down the bowl and leaned forward, flashing her withered breasts, to try to encourage him. "I can arrange to be languid," she whispered, popping a plum into the surprised mouth of the young man. He sat up in shock, turned yellow as yarrow, and in panic fled down the stone stairs and into a dewy field where he spent the intervening night under the umbrella of three ageless trees. The queen could only gawp, no longer an old lady fear-

fully bedizened, but, worse now, an angry royal on the cusp of near epileptic hate.

The rumor quickly spread that Vaillancourt was in danger, so his girlfriend, a lovely maiden named Childebrand to whom he sent a message, rowed him out to a ship in the channel, which that very hour set sail for distant lands, beginning with Belgium but reaching as far as Jerusalem.

Is it not a legitimate truism that what you ignore is liable to kill you?

Young Vaillancourt had been taught music by contemplative monks, had also been taught morality. Sex for the queen was whim. To experience it casually in cause and consequence was necessarily to separate it from sin and spirit at the same time and mock not only intimacy but the beauty of sexual congress itself.

"Fishpiss! Rotball! Snites!" screeched the jilted queen, flinging madly about her rooms with biting anger in the wake of this sudden repudiation. She furiously slapped a statue of Saint Joseph. She kicked a chair across the room. Looking in a glass with curses she bitterly demoted, "I will take this hog-jowled, weasel-eyed, sponge-columned, mush-fisted, jelly-spined, four-flushing little Christian and turn him inside out so that in delight he can watch his own death!" Out of monstrous arrogance in order to save face she then revised the entire story of what had taken place. "I hated his hair," she told Wheeldex, who tentatively looked at his small wife, the cook. Both knew her well. "He was so common!" Several more looks crossed in the air. "Why did he always use those air-quotes with his fingers when he was speaking with irony? It was so unattractive! And his playing at such length! So florid—it, it, it all of it needed editing! Anyone could see he lacked passion!" Cutting him dead was not bad enough. He deserved far worse than that. With growing rue, the queen, taking her own measure, realized that he would certainly talk. The servants, quaking and bringing her a buttered toddy, asked what they could do?
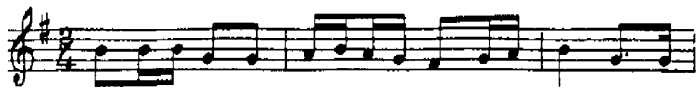
"*Upstick asswards!*" she howled as she ran from one to another, brandishing a stick like a sword and wagging it in a determined scold. Then she drew herself up. "Hearken to me, now. I will give anyone who rids me of him," she promised as she rattled in her hands a vellum proclamation that she had had that morning drawn up, "one quarter of a million in silver." A sullen group of bold, pecker-faced brutalitarians, skilled in assassination, was sent abroad to hunt down the young man and execute him as a malefactor. But not before the next day one of the hired thugs in a black mask secretively creepy-crawled the cottage of pure Childebrand, who like an angel unaware, innocent in her bed, was asleep in a gown of creamy Moroccan silk, and without mercy he smothered the poor girl by means of a purple poisoned feather murderously held down her throat.
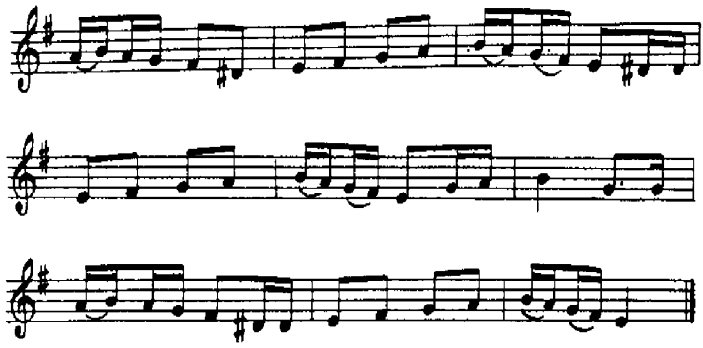
The Queen now bitterly hounded Vaillancourt. She who could smell a threat to her vanity like a cat sniffing cod, having traced him out, had him followed across Syria, Palestine, Egypt. As he walked, he thought: the more the universe seems comprehensi-

ble, the more pointless it seems. Under endlessly dark clouds and skies crucifixion-blue he kept on moving and avoiding his pursuers. He traveled widely through the guess-warps of the world, through deserts, ancient cities, the far-flung reaches of the earth itself. Nob. Zoar. Makkedah. The Adjacent Isles. Mount Richter. The filthy Stews of Jessup and Stahley. He sailed on a junk across the Sea Without Horizons, forded the Nail River, and walked across the meadows of Woodpecker Valley, the dim Crossbag Inlets, and way beyond the mountains called the Three Short Swineherds to the Movado Tor. Still, he wandered. To the Polyhedral Isles and the Caves of Cheddar. To the Chalice Hills and the Cymries Fold. To the Glass Islands and the Fingers of Nestorius. The Hills of Tsar-Maiden. Virtualville. Praeterita Butte. The Bolognese Revival. The Valley of Genicon. Condotierra. The Lands of Aeaeae. He climbed the peaks of Saint Gotthard on foot and descended the other side. Through the shapeless Jimbos he came in a haycart. He traversed the Combs of Oyonnax and the Anteriors of the Choreoid and the dread Drale of Konnive and, mauled with loneliness, reached even to the edge of the sea where rose the terrible Spitspat Mountains. He tramped the woods below and threaded through heather by the red burns and trailed through the quarries by the lovely but interminable side roads. His very own family, who never cared for him, forgot him entirely. "A family is only tilth; it blows away," a wise old hermit had once told him in the ebony Mercenary Mountains. But Vaillancourt was not well and still far too young to know that freedom is only a theory anyway.

As he passed from one land to another, the young man felt alienated. Winds, cold as Cortona, blew through his soul. It did not matter. He remained resolute. Aloneness is nearer God, he thought.

A year passed, then two. When Vaillancourt heard tragically by way of a passing ship that his beloved Childebrand was no longer alive, he secretly returned across many seas by way of a bumboat to Albion to try to visit the grave of his blessed paramour with the promise by the penumbral light of his soul like the satisfaction of a vow that, once finding it, he would honor it forever. He finally found the sacred grave, blessing himself, and devotedly scratched into the stone the following numbers, 1121790, and said aloud in mournful tones and what would turn out to be vatic insight, "One follows one to one's heaven I know." It seemed impossible that the beautiful young girl who had always smelled like fresh linen in the hot sun on the crest of a bright highland meadow was now gone. Going down on one knee by her lone gravestone, then, he took up his mandolin and played





"What is that noise?" wondered Faucetwater, who happened at the time to be sitting on the other side of the hill. A crow on a branch had called *ccr-r-ruk prukk* in the orange fog. When he saw who it was, the cripple took out a knife and stabbed the poor musician in the heart. He pawned the mandolin and hoping for the large purse he went to the castle and into the chambers of the queen, cap in hand, to collect his reward. But the Queen's Own Barrister who intercepted him took the hapless gravedigger aside to point out to the cripple, not without stifling mirth, a small detail on the skin of the royal proclamation. If he looked very closely to the promise, "I will give anyone who rids me of him one quarter of a million in silver," he could plainly see that a hyphen did not appear as written in the phrase "one quarter." The barrister thoughtfully opined that the luckless lad would have been rich if the hyphen *had* been written there, allowing him one-quarter of a million in bright silver. As it was, that not being the case, the lad was handed for his troubles a single coin of insignificant worth.

As to the queen, who was already in the extreme stages of myoma and a case of venal parametritus, she died in a very queer way. In an act roundly condemned by the Church, she had been sexually savaged on the floor of her very own boudoir while in the process—*horribile dictu*—of trying to have carnal knowledge with Slutswool, her very own pet. For being so polluted it was judged by the bishop's council that for the unholy profanation her body be thrown into the potter's field without exequies and be left to remain there for eternity without a grave-marker. Faucetwater in the end did a dance on her grave.

All of her poems were burnt in the main square at the pump in the village by townsfolk who to wide rejoicing then formed a mummer's parade that has since become an annual event in that country. It was proven true only once again that since the beginning is half the whole, the other half is a period of which God's creatures should therefore make good use. For, indeed, the other half is the end.

*

"You always have to add a moral," said Laura, yawning sleepily, suspecting of course that the moral was as usual was directed at her.

"Fables are supposed to have morals."

"I see," she said with accusatory precision, and repeating "I see" turned over and fell asleep.

XXVII
Touring the USA

They ate "Katzen Dawgs" in Kansas City, Missouri, and "Ragin' Rabbit" in Waco, Texas, and "High Plains Jerky" out west. "I preferred that 'Be Bop a Rebop Pie' in Wanamingo, Minnesota, the best," said Laura, who had a sweet tooth. "Not the moosewitch on a bun washed down with a bottle of Buffalo Butt Beer—'Everything It's Cracked up to Be'—in St. Paul?" asked Eugene, smacking his lips. "Or the corn-dogs we got for nineteen cents apiece along Plattes Rim, the seacoast of Nebraska?" They zigzagged north and south, drove through Novelty, Ohio; Peculiar, Missouri; Odd, West Virginia; and found out there really is a place like Home in Kansas! They stopped at a national park, canoed a river or two, picked blueberries, dawdled around several county fairs, and climbed an observatory. At the Herbert Hoover Library and Museum in West Branch, Iowa, in the soft morning air and a grey-green mist over a rise, they stopped and saw five Mennonite women browsing through the gift shop there, one of whom, a blonde twenty-five-year-old with a braid, gave Eugene cause to regret being with Laura, who, nipping a potential love story in the bud, cheerfully emerged from the ladies' room wipe-washing her hands, saying, "Thanks, Herbert Heeber!" The sunlight, whitewashed and soft, was almost a Monet canvas most of their days. But weather is one thing, whim another.

Historical places mostly bored Laura. She liked loud, high-gloss,

postapocalyptic mega-malls rimmed with fast-food eateries and video monitors and banks of lights for miles outside. Silent, tired fat men with baseball hats grouched and stumbled through these malls behind acquisitive, overweight, middle-aged women with double chins in jogging suits and white socks and sneakers who to the drone of unidentifiable piped-in music virtually drifted like melancholy balloons from one shop to another with faces of placid imbecility badly looking for something to need to want to buy, supremely indifferent, all the while, to anyone behind them—Americans are always in your way—brainlessly humming to themselves while indifferently and pointlessly picking up objects and putting them down. Some motive deeper than greed animated Laura when shopping. She actually could not afford much of anything. It seemed that hers was a declaration as much as an activity queerly taken up as if to verify for herself that she had the *right* to spend money. The ongoing anxiety that attached to her was that she simply had no inner resources, which is why she could not be alone. (One of Eugene Eyestones's many theories about himself was that, since in childhood—who knew, maybe even infancy—his worst fear was being left alone, by choosing to face it ever since in order to live without fear, he had overcompensated and become prisoner to the fact of a solitude he now needed.) Just as Laura spent money on things she did not really like, while Eugene often saw smugness in her nature, there seemed, curiously, not a trace of joy or satisfaction when she did buy something.

"I like you in that sweater," said Eugene of a possible purchase Laura one afternoon hesitated to make. "You look good in brown." She bit her cheek, deliberating, then put it back on the rack. "What's wrong with brown? Marilyn Monroe got married wearing a brown suit with a white Peter Pan collar." She looked sarcastically skyward and said, "We're back to her again? And which marriage do you mean, her ninth or tenth?" "I'm only trying to reassure you." "I don't want reassurance. I don't want to hear about some whorish, peroxided dumbbell. And I don't want that retarded sweater." Switching off, he walked to another aisle. For company? Thoughts. Mostly unpleasant ones. Some regretful. On the trip he had tried just about everything with her: compliments, coldness; familiarity, formality; sincerity, silence. He did not want to lose faith in women in general as Chasuble had ("Skirt skirts! Have you not seen *Renegade*?") or become as slick and vain as Discknickers had ("Do you believe in love at first sight or should I

walk by again?") or grow as cold and cynical as Mutrux ("I wanted to see her again in order to hate her all the more!"). Laura, who was sadly one of those women who actually looked worse when dressed-up than when wearing regular clothes—in the way, for instance, that formerly fat people often look less attractive, almost even abnormal when thinner, haggard, ruined, greyhound-ugly—ended up buying a few scrunchies for her hair and nothing more out of self-assassinating reappraisal.

At least she paid for them this time. A year or so previous, Eugene had been shopping with her one day at the Garment District and she had walked out carrying a shirt under her arm. Following in her wake, he looked shocked and asked, "Did you pay for that?" "I took it," she said. "What?" "I nicked it." "What?" he asked. Had she heard him, and, hearing him, had she remorse? The thought seemed to convolve in her head like an electron buzzing inside an atom. "I clearing-housed it," she demurely replied and kept on walking. It was amazing.

On this day, they got into the car and drove away. Laura unwrapped a Hostess Twinkie and began eating it. As they rode along through the buttery light of the broad afternoon, Laura blankly stared out at the countryside, perhaps upset that she could not find what she was looking for. She said, "This must have been what Chuck Berry meant by being way out in the Kokomo." She rolled down her window and threw a ball of cellophane at a cow.

On the road there was some joy. They often got lost with Laura on map patrol—Gerhardus Mercator she was not—for which she registered not a sign of contrition. Who cannot find humor, however, in driving through what you think is Moonachie only to discover that you're still in the Worcester Hills? "When are we going to Las Vegas?" became her primal scream. They both tried passing the time with interactive play. They discussed what foods they hated and chose their top ten favorite travel spots and did Zen exercises such as what does Zen taste like and what color is Zen and what is my original face? He told her stories and fables. At times they talked. On occasion as they drove through hot meadowy afternoons they were content to remain quiet, listening only to the endless banks of crickets and the drumming of their leathery elytra or wing covers against their wings. There were other times and places when he tried to amuse her and put on spontaneous puppet shows for her with his finger and hands in shadow-shapes, and did magic tricks like the Card-to-Wall Transfer and the

Great Rubber Band Escape and the Coin-through-the-Handkerchief. On certain days, in an attempt to accomplish something and because she was willing, he would assign a Yeats poem for her to read and think about—he had brought along, and was happy he had, his old blue-and-white Macmillan *Collected Poems*—whereupon they would discuss the chosen poem together; in other words, he would explain it to her. He also told her everything he knew about the life of crows: their food habits, how they lived, flew, foraged, ate, spoke, warned each other, sent out signals, and slept. All things considered, she preferred music on the radio or shoving in cassettes and catching tunes.

And writing in her pet journal, especially after arguments, stand-offs, and disagreements, in a corner, scribbling away like a woodpecker. "Am I and my personalities being recorded in that journal of yours?" asked Eugene, opening a bag and offering her an apple. She sniffed it suspiciously. "No heirloom apples or signature fruit, I'm afraid, Laura. Sorry, just a fresh Baldwin with a bumph complexion, which is why they are no longer sold in supermarkets. Americans prefer shiny, plastic, perfectly complected, unblemished ones that all look the same and taste like Christmas bulbs." She took a bite. "So, are you writing about me in there?"

She shook her head. "I was writing about Warholic, who I hope someday eats hot death."

"You don't have to hope—just be. Doesn't hope refuse the present? Contradict the future? Try to get over it, Laura. Forget that man. Don't attack power. Don't court power. Do you hear what I'm saying? Look at me. Civilize power, and start with yourself. Don't you agree?"

Silence.

"Don't you agree?"

Nothing.

She pitchpoled the apple core out of the windy window and slouched back.

Talking rarely led anywhere. She was defensive and self-conscious. Evaluative conversations threatened her to her very being, and skill-testing questions she positively hated. When she got depressed, Eugene tended to believe that depression is anger. Was tallness then an attempt to reach high? Rheumatism an obstinate refusal—rebelliously—to bend the joints? Homosexuality a frustration of the wish to betray a mother's love and/or have a child? "Lighten up," he often told her. "My God, you act so old—you're older than I am." They tried playing

"Pass the Evening," making up three-minute speeches on any subject of the other's devising. Not one minute longer. Not four minutes. On any subject. But Laura had to be challenged and was galled by it. She who could not think on her feet found games like that always futile and she never failed to quit. She lagged in consequence, intentionally delayed, and in consequence tried to get a bit of her own back by being slow and so usually late, which eventually became a studied policy of hers. She went shopping in stores for hours intentionally attempting indifference, even if she did not have to buy anything. The idleness that blunted his enthusiasms she felt he deserved for all the haranguing he did. Let's go, let's go, let us go, Eyestones heard himself constantly pleading. *Di thoi! Di thoi!* Let's move. Getting out of a car took her forever. Laura *ritordando*: she was slower than sorghum. If you are born round, Eyestones remembered his grandmother would say, you don't die square. Several times, at particularly leaden intervals, he thought of simply dropping the whole enterprise of traveling with Laura, deciding in the end, not without effort, to continue on with the trip, but in his muddle creatively—kookily—thinking of Oliver Hardy's remark in *Sons of the Desert* regarding his own befuddling partner: "All right! If I have to go to Honolulu alone, he's going with me!"

It became a constituent feature of Laura's cold disapproval of him at one point that she completely refused to believe anything he said, whereas, according to the criterion of dissimilarity, the remark of any good-looking guy she saw and heard on any chance encounter was, by definition, assumed to be authentic, especially if it was distinctively different from Eyestones's. "Horny goatweed," Laura would always say, flashing a grin, whenever she spotted an attractive man. She once made such an exclamation in a gas station watching a blond guy standing by a trash barrel, bite-snapping the cellophane off a package of Necco Wafers. When she sashayed over to get some candy herself but stopped with an "I've got something you need" smile to ask directions from him, Eugene for a moment actually considered flooring the pedal and driving away and leaving her there for good, following the widely accepted but dubious premise, commonly put forth by pistolero leaders, that the only justification of force is to reduce the amount of force necessary to use.

"I liked Pigtail," she declared at another time, smirking, after they had stopped by the side of the road to check out a yard sale in Fairyland, Tennessee, presided over by a chunky, fairly good-looking mi-

somundist with a ponytail selling his worldly goods. Laura said. "Oh Daddy, buy me that!" "That dirt-bike?" asked Eugene. "That hotty—or someone like him!" she cried and half-sung the *or*, lilting it out in a faux-operatic tone, filled with self-amusing regard. "You like him?" he asked, screeching to a stop. He thought she was going to ovulate on sight. He shoved the car into reverse and backed up the road to the spot where a horse-blanket was piled high with pots and pans, leaned over, and wordlessly flung open the door for her to get out. Looking horrified, she took the gum out of her mouth, scrunched down, and, covering her eyes with her hands, embarrassingly cried, "*Don't, don't, don't, don't!*" He waited a minute, gunned the engine, and drove on. As a result, she refused to speak to him for three days.

It was not only overweight men with pigtails that turned her on, however. Certain smells and images, she said, put her in the mood: beeswax, tar, virtually all rock stars, Calandre for men by Paco Rabanne, Arab knives, Y-front briefs, sleeveless vests, the pert buttocks of the cowboys in the movie *High Noon*, the fur of men's leather gloves, and the talc of baby powder. She said she liked the smell of breads and rolls in the bakery at the Food Crypt, their nickname for the supermarket in Central Square. She always thought of sex, she confessed, when looking at men's arms, horse saddles, ham (wrapped only), magazines ads for white jockey shorts, oil paint, dark tunnels, tall trees, boots, listening to Martin Denny jungle-music LPs, spinning in place—Eyestones could not believe it—guys wearing T-shirts and jeans, preferably washed in Dynamo 2, when the fly was half open, empty rooms, stories of snipers, closed window-blinds, the sound of chimes, medieval armor, rain, and things with the color light green, which she once read was the color of male sexuality. Other aphrodisiacs for her were the word *sheets*, museum silence, crow-black clothes, shiny bathing suits even worn by girls, cashmere sweaters, lipsticks, Spanish men, pictures of tongues, buff Negroes, vodka, handcuffs, Pink Floyd LPs, slightly unshaven men, just dusk—that time of the day when the sun was just going down, about five in the afternoon in autumn—and of course her ongoing fantasy: the lewd idea of seducing an innocent thirteen-year-old boy.

What she needed, it seemed to Eyestones even in those early days they spent together, was a continual round of crises and the oscillations between rejection and reconciliation necessary to convince herself that she was in the midst, not of a great love affair, perhaps, but at least of

a drama that could be felt, a passion experienced.

"I want to sketch that," she cried at one point in the Sonora desert, pointing out a distant butte with an intense, deliberating eye. They found themselves way out in some godforsaken basin, way below sea level. He would actually remember the day sitting in the hot car reading Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*, the definitive wisteria novel, and how the melancholy mood in those grim pages seemed to fit his own. Predictably, within a half-hour of his pulling over to the side of the road when she got out and bowleggedly strode to a far spot, walking like a jaybird on a frozen pond, after a few incompetent false starts on paper, flubdubs along the lines of cave murals, pure *arte rupestre*, she abruptly ceased, the way children stop coloring with crayons upon the instant of running out of their favorite hue. "I can't fucking *do* things!" she snapped with real shrillness, illogically adding, "Even though I try, and I do. I do try, you hear me? But I promise you, trust me, when I have no one to help me, to have patience with me"—herewith a cold, studied look—"I'm outta here."

A silence fell. It set in like tension. Eugene quietly asked, "What do you mean?" Laura turned to him and clipped her words. "Think about it."

But glumly it was her he thought of. More war than jaw. Jaw and caw. No frolic. A hole, not holy. Carbolic. Raw. Colic. Lore-a. Lower. Why had he undertaken this trip, he wondered. Didn't Pascal once remark that all the misfortunes of mankind stem from the inability to remain quietly in a room?

Never once on that trip did Laura approach a task or assume a new interest, try a new tack, or attempt any new project without almost immediately backing away from it with the usual descants into irony, cynicism, and low comedy, most often bitter mockery, with the accompanying defense that having no funds prevented the chance to do anything in the first place. He also tried to tell her that lack of money needn't badly restrict her range. In a caring but didactic mood, excercising a professorial right he assumed, Eugene made Laura memorize a passage near the end of *Walden*:

> It is life near the bone where it is sweetest. You are defended from being a trifler. No man loses ever on a lower level by magnanimity on a higher. Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul.

She put the laws to memory but never bothered to follow them. What bothered Eyestones was not only her pessimism but the effect on him of withdrawing from her company. He couldn't help it. It just happened. He was always pulling away from her. Was that why in all the years he knew Laura, through every stage and season, there was not a single photograph of the two of them together, not one, anywhere, including, remarkably, the period of that long trip across country? In their travels, although Laura had bothered to take photographs, she had spent much more time as they rode spinning the radio dial, engaging in various punk aerobics like "air guitar," the "skank," and the "fire hydrant," and searching the local and national airwaves up and down all day for the Absolute Hit. "I hate country music," she groused hearing a bit of it in a rural Wal-Mart one late afternoon in a typically farouche mood buying packets of short socks, jar candles, a canvas wall decor, and a grey tin piece of cheap bakeware with a short-lived plan to make cupcakes that never quite came about. Not that Eyestones particularly liked country music either or any of that smirking, inarticulate, cloying, right-wing, crotch-forward, narrow triumphalism heard in it that so many Americans seemed to admire. Its anger. Its tub-thumping reaction. Its frantic evangelism. Southern radio. How often driving through places with names like Hangtown or Clinch Valley or Placerville had they heard coming through the radio, "He's-ah God in Alabama! He's-ah God in Tennessee! He's-ah God in Nawth Cahlina! He's-ah God all over me! Oh, I tell yew, God is ah-God, and Jeees-hoss is his-ah name!"?

Eugene turned to Laura. "Did you ever notice that you never hear a country song about teenagers or young people?" "Oh, but honey-chile," intoned Laura, carefully counting out a few dollars to a bird-thin check-out clerk who looked like a balding career-sadist and giving an exaggerated chawnk to her gum, "don' you jes' loove them there string ties—*taahhhs*—big doofus hats, and names like Ferlin, Narvel, and Wynonna?"

Irony suited Laura when she saw its advantages. In her flipness, she could be funny. She did song parodies, mocked movie stars with the best of them, and was keyed into all sorts of slang. As they rode along, they contrived to come up with various childish and goofy games with which to amuse each other, like Opposite Day. "Weren't you telling me that you once worked as a watchmaker?" asked Laura, sarcastically fabricating a pair of eyeglasses with her circled fingers. "Can we

hear that brilliant Barry Manilow version of 'Memories' again, please please please?" "At least there are no mosquitoes here," she said, slapping her bitten arms blue, just as he pulled over to a ranch-house-long restaurant with a sunken roof set back off the road in Mulberry, Arkansas. "Isn't this place too expensive?" she asked.

"What's your choice?" asked Eugene, sliding the menu toward her as they sat down."'Coldtonguecoldhamcoldbeefpickledgherkinssaladfreshrollswatercresssandwiches-pottedmeatgingerbeerlemonadesodawater—'"

Laura scrunched up her nose, "Come again?"

He shrugged. "It's from *The Wind the Willows*."

"Who?"

"Never mind."

She ordered a chicken sandwich.

Eugene laughed. "It's called 'normative inversion.'"

"What is?"

"Things like Opposite Day. Reversing cultural laws. Criticism is a kind of survival. It's behind a lot of juvenile delinquency. Even sexual vanity, in my opinion. With many men and women insistently and rather stupidly defining themselves by what they are not. Walls, not bridges, result. Look at the course of history. The Egyptians cut their hair, so the Hebrews passed laws against it. The Canaanites loved pork cooked in milk, and so the Hebrews of course immediately banned it. Take the number 7: it became sacred in Hebrew numerology—now we're going back to the Babylonian Captivity, 586 to 538 B.C., ever hear of it?—simply because that number was hated by the Babylonians who, having once reckoned numbers by the knuckles of their joints, three ticks to a finger, not including the thumb. A full hand became five times twelve equals sixty. So a 'fist' meant 60, see? They found that 1 went into 60, as did 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, but not 7." He waggled his fingers. And so the number 7, which was held suspect by the Babylonians became"—he shrugged—"a Hebrew sacred number."

"You're saying?

"Irony is retaliation."

God help us, he thought with pity. She remains an enemy of complication, revealing again that what can be proved with few assumptions is proved in vain with more. Occam's Razor.

Laura yawned.

"AYPI?"

"What?"

"And your point is?"

"I think you live the way you do intentionally in order to shock your parents."

"Thanks, Gooey Duck. All right if I pay the psychiatrist's fee in fries at the next McDonalds?"

They were rolling along now, taking in America like a panoramic shot. They drove through Laurel, Delaware, and Hardy, Kentucky. They wended their way through Napoleon, Indiana, and Bonaparte, Iowa. They went through Atlantic, Pennsylvania, and Pacific, Missouri. They went through Bird-in-Hand, Pennsylvania, where they ate shoo-fly pie ("The secret's in the crust") and Bite-Bend, Arkansas, where they ordered loney dogs ("Bite 'em before they bite you.") "I wanna go to Las Vegas," declared Laura for the twentieth time. They went to a rattlesnake cattle round-up in Okeene, Oklahoma, an Indian pow-wow in Shembo, Tennessee, and visited the birthplace of Amelia Earhart in Atchison, Kansas. They crossed the Mississippi, a wide body of cloacal brown, and drove into the beating heart of Middle America. They looped about. They saw fat, white-faced cattle in Harold, North Dakota, and danced the "Too Fat Polka" in Rice Lake, Wisconsin, and even talked to a blind man in Video, Indiana, who shared with Eyestones one of his theories of blindness, which held that the indisposition was actually an aspect of solitude that allowed for truths never allowed to sighted folk. Although they happily passed through Washington, Missouri, the Corncob Capital of the World, and bought a corncob pipe as a memento, they managed to avoid hokey Branson, Missouri, curiously enough America's number-one bus destination. Eugene, who tried to please Laura, frankly had to draw a line at several travel suggestions of hers got from a magazine of hers with dubious listings. What, stop over in Des Moines, Iowa, whose boast was that it consumed more Jell-O than any other city in the United States? Visit Hastings, Nebraska, the official birthplace of Kool-Aid? Stop at the ruined rustic church in Stull, Kansas, ten miles west of Lawrence, which, according to reports is thought to be one of the seven gateways of hell? Stop over in Los Cruces, New Mexico, where annually the world's largest enchilada is unfailingly assembled? Check out Morehead, North Carolina, site—where else?—of the Annual Bald Men's Convention?

It was in Missouri after they set out early one morning in the shrimp-

pink dawn that they pulled over, took out a large foldout map, and spread it open. How about going to Independence, earnestly asked Eugene, the locale which the controversial Mormon prophet Joseph Smith actually claimed was the site of the original Garden of Eden? Laura moaned. What about Kansas City where, also according to Smith, Cain not only killed Abel but, parenthetically, Adam and Eve began the human race? No, said mocking Laura, drawing a square in the air. No, said Laura making a triangulating move to the radio. No, said Laura, glowering out the rectangle of the window. No, said Laura, from the depths of her quinquangular personality.

They had no time.

No quality time.

Not, that is, after a volatile incident took place hard upon them stopping at a small fair in the pretty countryside where at a Methodist church-group for youngsters Eugene was handed a ukulele he helped tune for someone, and being challenged to contribute to the festivities, to be obliging, he decided upon an old melody which he quite chastely sang to a young girl of about eleven with the innocent face of a small Hayao Miyazaki cartoon who—unlike Laura who, forever insecure and so always jealous, stood on the edge of the gathering, red as a Coca-Cola can, with her arms folded—was charmed by the words. "If we stood face to face," Eugene sang by way of the song's lead-in as he strummed the instrument, "and I were in your place," he strummed the strings, "I'd know what course of action to take . . .

"If I were you I'd fall in love with me
If I were you I'd never let me free
I'd hug me tight and squeeze me
I'd never want to tease me
I'd dream about me all through the night
If I were you I'd fall in love with me
If I were you I'd never let me free
If I were you I'd take me to the preacher
And I'd tell him that I want to marry me.
If I were you I'd fall in love with me
If I were you I'd never let me free
So why not start deciding
When we'll be groom and briding
If I were you that's what I'd do with me."

Unforgiving, Laura said as they drove away, "What did that girl in the Raymond Chandler novel that you once read to me tell that guy?" Eugene looked at her in bewilderment. "Dangle!" she snarled and faced the window. There was no quality time, not when Laura after what now seemed to be almost hourly disagreements grew either silent by taking refuge in long sulking interludes—on the Glasgow Coma Scale, which ranges from a three (no brain activity) to a high of fifteen (fully cognitive), she registered about a ten—either by scribbling in her journal with that kleptopsychotic compulsion of hers by robbing life to give to what she no doubt considered art, or with mercilessly loud attention-challenging page-snaps flashing through one of those trashy paperback books of transgressive fiction where shirtless studs and half-draped tarts were pictured in bright colors on the cover to which she, like her mother, was so addicted: cheap, poorly-written, slack, pornographic, forgettable, and dumb. Speaking only occasionally out of the side of her mouth, Laura would mutter, "I hate that radio station" or "Gas is low" or "Didn't you *see* that truck?"

"Call the White House."

"Bull," she said.

"Do. The Complaint Line: 202-456-1116. Go ahead. Be a pain in the ass. You are. You know?"

Eyestones, who hated such disagreeableness, wanted to make up. Did expectation beget entitlement? Regarding Laura, he recalled what Chasuble had once told him, "'For anybody who is difficult, there's a dirty name,' as Alexis Smith said in the 1949 film *Any Number Can Play*." They were fighting the light, as they say in fashion. Often Laura got her way simply by capitalizing on being the weaker party. What did they call that in S & M, "topping from the bottom" or something like that, where the drubbee is actually doing the drubbing? A thaw eventually began. Out of the blue Laura began singing with a wide smirk—was it a hint?—Erasure's "Who Needs Love Like That?" Cheap punk or the howls or pop music, even her own fractured renditions, always lifted her up. As did rock musicians of course. The players themselves. She *knew* them. Or so she claimed. Before they left Boston had she not been fixatedly staring, unaware that he saw, into the music section of one of the city's alternative newspapers and drooling over the photo of one particular dimwitted catso playing a guitar with wide eyes, no neck, and the H-mouth of a Campbell Kid cartoon? Who needs a love like

that? Or as Freud put it, what do women want? It is the question no one can answer. He asked her where she wanted to go. She snapped her gum and bagged her journal.

"I wanna go to Las Vegas," said Laura for the twenty-first time. He could not help but laugh. Mulishness to him had a sort of meretricious attraction. He wondered when she could get it to work for her.

As they wended their way cross-country, they developed what they called "Friendship Minutes." It called for effortful compromises that Eugene and Laura tried their best to agree on. They could pretty much tell which particular cities they were traveling through by the preponderance of bumper stickers on local cars: Dallas ("Keep honking, I'm reloading"); San Francisco ("We're here. We're queer. We're going shopping"); Little Rock ("Where men are men and women are women, and the sheep are glad of it"); Los Angeles ("Ignorance is bliss"); and so forth. Witty and wayward games resulted. They laughed over a crazy list that Laura had found somewhere on the Internet of imagined state mottos:

Arizona: "But It's a Dry Heat"
Arkansas: "Coming in 2008, Something to Do!"
Georgia: "Without Atlanta, We're Alabama"
New Jersey: "You a Made Man?"
Nebraska: "We Do Amazing Things with Corn"
California: "As Seen on TV"
West Virginia: "One Big Happy Family—Literally"
Alabama: "Ha, Har Yew?"
Ohio: "Everything Rubber and Round"
Kansas: "2 Billion Years Tidal Wave-Free"
Indiana: "Happiness Is Yelling Bingo!"
South Carolina: "Too Small for a Country, Too Large for an Insane Asylum"
Florida: "We're Shaped Like a Weenie"
Rhode Island: "Be Kind—Visit A Politician in Jail"
Maine: "Try A Mooseburger"
Pennsylvania: "Think of Tolls as Tips"
Tennessee: "The Educashon State"
Kentucky: "Five Million People, Seven Last Names"
Minnesota: "10,000 Lakes, 10,000,000 Mosquitoes"
New Mexico: "Lizards Make Excellent Pets"

Iowa: "No Mountains to Slow You Down"
Oklahoma: "Like the Musical, Only No Singing"
North Carolina: "Tobacco Is a Vegetable"
Texas: "Sí, Hablo Inglés"
West Virginia: "Hunting Is How Rednecks Shop for Groceries"

As time hung heavily on their hands riding the long freeways and straight highways and long desert roads, they also played lots of word games, like Who Am I, Ultraghost, Aesop's Mission, Acronymia, Inquisition, and Defective Detective, a rhyming game. They invented several games, like the funny, hateful game, when reviewing history, of Who Are You Glad Is Dead? and a straight academic game called Spellwell ("no, no, no, it's R*a*mon N*ova*rro!") and an immature game called Can You Hear Me Now? ("Can you hear me now?" [softer:] "Can you hear me now?" [even softer:] "Can you hear me now?") and an ingenious game called One Word ("Name the only word that's a sentence." "Attendance." What's an anagram of 'Washington'?" "Notwithstanding," etc.) and a music-related one called Story, where one had to tell a witty and inventive and of course spontaneous story based on any song that was playing or had played on the radio, like the odd "Tuesday Afternoon," the mysterious "A Whiter Shade of Pale," or the perverse "96 Tears." As they rode, they also threw out all sorts of antic challenges to each other, competitive in nature, such as who could count the largest number of grammatical errors in specific pop songs like Lou Rawls's "You're Gonna Miss My Lovin'" or Clarence "Frogman" Henry's "Ain't Got No Home" or in any of the past hits of country bumpkin Ray Stevens and even in certain simple but haunting eight-bar American folk classics like "Old Black Joe." Whenever they would go to the movies, as occasionally they did on rainy afternoons to see double-features, they would set up brain contests—no pens or pads of paper or pencils allowed in the theater—as to which of the two could best list the precise number, say, of commands lustily barked by the ego-mad, domineering cattleman John Wayne in *Red River*—so many in that case that both of them actually lost track—or the amount of times Cary Grant repeats the word "Ma" in *None But The Lonely Heart* or how often loony-eyed-from-terror Barbara Stanwyck fearfully touches her face in *Sorry, Wrong Number* or how many times Ralph Meeker playing sleuth Mike Hammer opens and walks through a door in *Kiss Me Deadly* or the number of cigarettes smoked in *Now, Voyager*

or in *The Bad and the Beautiful* or in *Beat the Devil* or the precise number of times that hopelessly wooden Dana Andrews playing even more hopelessly wooden Detective McPherson *almost* smiles—he never once actually does—in the movie *Laura* or the frequency, on buildings, hair, clothes, etc. that the bright color yellow appears on any object in the film musical *Oklahoma!* or how many times in every one of his movies Woody Allen repeatedly, casually, vulgarly, blasphemously takes the name of Jesus Christ in vain with crude insouciance.

"Name the three most popular names for towns in the United States—in order."

"Can't," she said.

"Midway. Fairview. Oak Grove."

Laura hated a know-it-all. With a forked smile, she impudently held up the *digiticus impudicus*, which Eugene ignored.

"Take out a piece of paper," said Eugene, opening the glove compartment. "Now write down this sentence. Just do it, 'In his wide travels, Saint Paul addressed 222222222222 people'—that's twelve 2s, OK?" Laura followed his directions. "Your task is to make an intelligible sentence by accurately translating all of the numbers before you."

"You must be joking."

"Give up?"

"Yes I do, Fingerbone!"

"'In his wide travels, Saint Paul addressed 22 to 2 to 2.22 to 222 people!'"

Laura threw aside the scratch pad and glowered. "So what about the *decimal* point?" She smiled. "See? Unfair!"

Anything to pass the time. They both selected a comic name, arbitrarily choosing "Wilpon," just to see how many citizens—region to region, state to state—could be found in the United States with that particular moniker, and it became part of the daily ritual wherever they went to inquire of each other, intermittently, "Check out the Wilpons yet?"

All sorts of nutty pastimes were taken up. To pass the time as they rode, they swotted up lists of location-themes, real ones, a more or less remarkable one being: Maggie's Nipple, Wyoming; Grand Tetons, Wyoming; Nipple Mountain, Colorado; Les Mamelles, Montana; and Breast Mountain, Arkansas. They even had contests, bouncing ludic digressions, as to who could best simulate various sounds, such as, for example, the sound of radio static, car horns—"All American

car horns beep in the key of F," pontificated Eugene—and, among other things, the sound of an idling motorcycle engine: "*Po-ta-to, po-ta-to*," said Eugene. But Laura countered, insistently, with "*Chukka-chok, chukka-chok*."

Another game was that each had to select the worst place in the USA that each of them most wanted to avoid, which, oddly enough, were both coincidentally church-related—for Laura, who had two LDS cousins, it was the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, and for Eugene it was the insane 200-foot Prayer Tower in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on the campus of Oral Roberts University to which on March 19, 1987, the shake-down artist and evangelist for whom that sectarian school is named, needing fast cash, repaired to count down his last days on earth after claiming that if his followers didn't come up with $8 million by the last day of that month, God would take his life or, as the buffoon put it, "take him home"—a lie, a blasphemy, existential blackmail, simony, and grand theft by a man of the cloth all at the same time! The money was donated by a Florida dogtrack owner, Jerry Collins. It turned out that Roberts not only took the money from gambling interests, a subject of prior Roberts attacks, the huckster actually tried to *delay* the news of his windfall to avoid, since it came a week before his deadline, losing any further opportunities of collecting more cash during that last week of that month!

"But *I* don't want to go to Utah either," Eugene told Laura.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because Joe Hill, a union organizer and messianic figure—he was a Swedish immigrant who wanted to abolish the wage system of capitalism—was treated badly there. In his final hour, he said 'Scatter my ashes anywhere but Utah.'"

Other guessing games they played of a more speculative genre included, among others, which states' license plates were the least colorful and why; what region had the dumbest accent (rural Georgia, they both agreed); where did most people seem to go to church (Tennessee); and who in what sociological category, according to hard statistics, were among all others the prime candidates for a heart attack ("An unmarried African-American from West Virginia on a Monday morning in March"—they stopped to check in a library in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania—is the officially documented answer).

They were not all scrimmages. They compiled a list of Mickey Warholic's offensive personal habits and all the things he despised. Eugene

laughed as he rolled down a window to breathe. "No, no. That gives you far too much of an edge," he confessed. He settled for quoting, self-deprecatingly, his most repeated apothegms for her amusement. For his own, he began to keep a random but running tab of various towns in the country with a sartorial name:

Stetson, Maine
Tuxedo, Maryland
Bandanna, Kentucky
Vest, Kentucky
Coats, Kansas
Lapel, Indiana
Belt, Montana
Moccasin, California

But Laura, who not only had limited experience and even less interest in the subject of pop or cultural history but who in fact had essentially traveled to no consequence—being uncirculated, a plus in the immutable law of numismatics, was, in her case, a ringing minus—tended to find most of the games tedious or, as she put it, "fuddy-duddyish," and was too often an unwilling participant, trampling his ineffable pretexts for fun. It took small attention for such simple preoccupations. But she wanted only what she wanted. And that was that.

She seemed to get by. The ailanthus or backyard tree thrives in poor soil. Who was he to try to change her?

XXVIII
Boustrophedon

It was the 1970s, above all, that Laura Warholic most loved and best remembered, the era of clogs, wide neckties, bushy sideburns—with the notable exception of John Travolta's freakazoidal pompadour in *Saturday Night Fever* with no sideburns at all!—velour, bean-bag chairs, Chex party mix, fondue pots-and-forks, huge Afros, leisure suits, banana seats on bicycles, Anita Bryant's caterwauling, women's white boots, Bicentennial chat, the novels of Richard Brautigan, Bel Air cigarettes, turtleneck shirts, Blue Öyster Cult, the "Let's Talk About Me" movement, Marimekko wall hangings, electric water, Soyuz 9, analyses of patriarchy and perfectly insane feminist theories, *The Love Boat*, feathered hair, Fat Elvis singing "If I Can Dream," swinging, indoor/outdoor carpeting (rust, aquamarine, etc.), macramé plant hangers, white belts, Junket, madras jackets, continental bag-trousers with elephant bell cuffs, Zenith hearing aids, Lejon champagne, door-knocker earrings, mesh tops, *A Chorus Line*, colored leather, John Denver without his eyeglasses, the Chrysler New York Brougham, name ties, corduroy bib-shorts, disaster movies, Dry Sack sherry, Elvis's divorce from Priscilla, the Olds Tornado, bell-bottoms with heart-shaped pockets, Jovan Musk lotion, pukka shell necklaces, Mountain Dew, string art, denim handbags, Wallabees, Kork-Ease wedgies, eight-track tapes, Uri Geller, mushroom lamps, Polaroid SX-70 color cameras, magicubes, corduroy suits, electric scissors, Jetware Plastic tumblers, plaid

half-gallon thermometers, No-Quit-Knits by Jaymar, Munsingwear, Sansabelt, Sus-pants, glitter, tube tops, mood rings, Jolly Ranchers, leather bracelets, the Cincinnati Reds' "Big Red Machine," The Midnight Special on TV, Celanese Fortrel, Earth Shoes, sofas of marigold and ecru and avocado, *The Exorcist*, a movie about an innocent twelve-year-old girl who is supposedly possessed by the devil which as an absolute of evil defined horror for the country while 60,000 American soldiers were being slaughtered for nothing, not to mention more than the half-a-million exterminated Vietnamese, and rolling off the national assembly line some of the worst automobiles ever made, including the Plymouth Cricket, the Chevy Nova and Chevette, and AMC's Gremlin, which was actually launched on April Fool's Day, 1970! And then of course seventies music. Talk about oxymorons! Paul Williams songs. Donny and Marie. The Three Degrees. Captain and Tennille. Tom Jones, Seals and Croft, Engelbert Humperdinck. The Partridge Family. Air Supply. Gerry Rafferty. All those cheerless and depressing, elevator-music-sounding, bowel-tightening piano orchestrations like "The Theme from *The Apartment*" and "The Pink Panther" and "Love's Theme" by Love Unlimited.

"I find a kind of honey in it all," declared Laura, about whom farce always hovered, studiously staring into some inner space where whatever moments that she entertained came across as reality, not recollection. Something in her positively jumped in consequence, her eyes glowing bright as a bush baby's, a golden potto's, matched the weird, unbalancing shine in her face that was very unsettling. "'When will I see you agaaaain, dah doo dah doo dah doo,'" she loudly sang, "'When will our hearts beat togetheeeer?'" She smiled as her ears stood up like a fennec fox's. "Gotta problem with it, Cheese Doodles? Not enough crunk? Too recent? Personally I don't see why you got issues with such stuff, honest to God"

Making no reply, Eugene pulled into a gas station to fill the empty tank, but as Laura was walking back from the restroom, chomping a whopping Taco Bell Bellbeefer that she bought for herself, she noticed the young station attendant washing the car windshield and winking at Eugene said, "What color is my heart? Pink, pink." Since Eugene by now understood the Mozartian ease with which Laura went from seeing a stranger to spotting a potential mate, he chalked it up as much to the decade she grew up in as to the abstract vice of her own needy instincts, but it nevertheless put some lead into his comments as he

resumed their discussion.

"Beige was big then. Everything in the 1970s was muted, right?" asked Eugene, trying to take the mickey out of her with harmless amusement. "I remember the mullet haircut: that was fun. Lemon-tinted refrigerators were also refreshing. But personally I will always regard as the symbol of that wonderful decade President Richard Nixon's over-theatrical, self-deluded wave of goodbye on the steps of that waiting helicopter—a crossed-arm job, as if he were standing on Mount Everest—that nonexistent ass of his pulled-in tight, that hateful lacquered-on smile, his wet filtrum dripping hot sweat like a laboring camel's, those long feet of his sticking out, before departing the purlieus of Washington DC for the sanctuary of distant California with his mortified family in tow in the stink of utter disgrace."

It was not so much an age like the revolutionary Sixties that by questioning authority and contesting empty form and challenging the status quo wholesale changes were effected as much as it was a decade of just plain duncery. Laura, who continuously appeared to be the embodiment of the 1970s with her piped corduroy trousers and laughably out-of-date Quiana shirts and clunky shoes that she had scored at one of her favorite thrift shops, lived for its shopable delights, shaking free of dust and dorts and always with squeals of joy whenever she came across the clothes on the racks there, when with continuing *legato*—and a lust for "retro"—she would go snatching up everything from snorkel jackets to terrycloth V-necks to moon boots to bell-bottom "floods," all of the cheesy kataphernalia that not only embodied that dull decade but that thin women especially like her when dressing, not that she cared, should try to avoid, such as straight skirts, high-waisted jeans, clinging fabrics, and big, clunky or heavy-looking shoes. As she would endlessly prose on about such things until he thought he would scream out loud, Eugene would try to highlight certain remarkable facts for her as they drove just to change the subject. "The great white pines were the first trees in American forests to go," he would say, "for masts." Or "Neither the Blue nor Grey wanted to fight at Gettysburg. Lee's goal was to take the capital at Harrisburg." Or "Johnny Appleseed was from Massachusetts." Or "September 10th is the peak of the hurricane season." Or "Wedding cakes in England are always fruit cakes." Or "The sun on a crow's back gives its wing the look of boards." Or "Cowboys always pointed the wagon tongue toward the North Star at night before they went to sleep." Or "The call of a

barn owl sounds exactly like the hysterical scream of a woman." Or "Perennials are drugstores for birds." Or "A polar bear can smell food eighteen miles away."

"Stellar," she'd reply, batting her glaukoptic eyes and reaching for the radio.

"What are you fiddling with the radio for?" asked Eugene, as they drove.

"I'm trying to find some half-decent music on this thing, like Trick or Grand Funk Railroad or, I don't know, what about Styx or Deep Purple?" *Or an insane Circassian plucking a string on a balalaika*, thought Eugene. *Or a lonely elk in Canada baying at the distant planet Pluto. Or a Chinese eunuch ululating in a furnace.* Composer Ned Rorem was right, considered Eugene: twain do not meet.

"Oh my God, I need to be sedated," Eugene laughed, teasing her with a poke, when Laura mentioned—favorably!—in that wackadoodle voice of hers that was always reserved exclusively for adulation hip-hop, trip-hop, funk, groove, house, Tropicalia. To him she was as loony as a college basketball coach. She was a boustrophedon, actually, a scattergun kind of writing in which the direction of the lines alternated, oddly going this way and that. The red is genetically in the green tomato, he realized. He laughed, but he felt enveloped at times by an uneasy emptiness while he was with her and began to realize that retreating into his mind, as he often did, was perhaps a sign of that. In light of all her bubblegum-chat, Eugene suddenly had a glimpse of his own life turning backwards. Their own course was a spiral, he saw, "boxing the compass," as mariners say, setting out, heading westward, but half the time going south into one great declivity. Good God, am I going down with her, he wondered upon more sober reflection—anticipation is invented recollection—and he remembered the lines,

> Mr. and Mrs. Discobolus
> Had climbed to the top of the wall.
> "Oh! W! X! Y! Z!
> It has just come into my head
> Suppose we should happen to fall!"

What specific properties of humpty-dumptyism he experienced in her he traced to her own conception of what she could not manage to *do*. It was jealousy in fact that stung her into pettiness. She proved to

be a jealous and arbitrary artist whose inability to draw (basic strokes) left an emptiness in her that she filled with a peevish competitiveness that became the point of departure for all sorts of jealousy. Once in Patchogue, New York, where they once got confoundedly lost looking for a winery, she became convinced that Eugene dropped the name "Carol," grew pathologically silent, and didn't speak to him for a full *day*. He experienced twenty-plus variations of that in the subsequent months when they traveled the reaches of the country. He found her lack of self-realization and its shared effects more painful than her almost textbook moodiness, traces of which he had seen from the first. Maddeningly, she would not be accused of acts that took place a mere hour before but fully deny any such thing happened, forcing Eugene into an anger he hated in himself but had to adopt to make a point. Her anger was her lack of talent, *created* it, so to speak, in a parody—a paradox—of making and doing at the same time! Envy in making her mean killed any possibility of self-delight. Table-turning with unreason, she virtually disowned her self. Denial. Refusal. Disavowal. Illogic. Rejection. Contradiction. Shape-shifting.

"I've an idea," laughed Eugene. "Why don't we go to the famous Reversing Falls in Saint John, New Brunswick, so we can feel at home?"

"What is Reversing Falls?"

"The river runs two ways, created by the Bay of Fundy's extreme tides, the highest in the world." The radio was blaring, a long unidentifiable guitar wad. He spun the dial, looking for something decent.

Laura groaned as he kept fiddling with the knob. Banging desert sand out of one of her macramé platforms on the car window, she inquired, "What can you offer that's so much better, Pixie Butt?"

"I'm the wrong one to ask. I get fond tears in my eyes listening to 'Stella by Starlight,' dreaming of the Thirties, seeing the Depression in dark alleys, oil stoves, radio dramas, old train yards, men in hats, Busby Berkeley, black-and-white movies, desks with inkwells, the dustbowl, old Fords, oil lamps, a Tina Modotti face in sepia. An old lady standing in the middle of a Walker Evans photograph."

"You and that loopy, er, Duxbak."

"What's loopy about him?"

"I don't know," she said. "He's so—"

"I don't find him loopy," said Eyestones, after waiting in vain for the adjective.

"Loosen up, Sweetie Cakes. So tell me?"

"What?"

"What's so much better."

"In music? You don't like what I like. Come on, admit it. I like the Coon-Sanders Kansas City Nighthawks and you," he laughed, "sit there in your clothes like a Greek looking at a grape leaf and want to talk about Bikini Kill or Smutball or the Lunachicks in black stilettos and toe polish and bat-logos singing 'The Day Squid's Gerbil Died,' which I admit is a step up from Bread or Elton John or whatever. I remember one night last spring sometime when you came over to visit me, and I tried unsuccessfully to play you some of my records, old ones on Crow labels, Banner labels, Harmony labels, and Okeh labels, like 'Hoodoo Voodoo Man' by Dubin's Dandies, 'Miss Annabelle Lee' by Lillie Delk, 'I Like Pie, I Like Cake, But I Like You Best of All' by the Edwin J. McEnelly Orchestra, Gene Austin's 'Gotta Feelin' I'm Fallin,' things like that. 'Doin' the Racoon' by Ted White's Collegians. I seem to recall you liked some old Sweet Emma Barrett records, but you yawned through most of them and spent much of the evening singing—what was it?—oh yes, Irene Ryan singing 'Granny's Mini-Skirt' with vocal background by the Markleys." He tapped her knee. "Are you depressed that we didn't stop over at Fort Mill, South Carolina, and visit the corporate headquarters at Muzak?" She looked away. He reached into the back seat, carefully picked up thin-wrapped parcel, and held it out. "Take a look at this, will you? Now be careful, it's fragile."

"Atwhay ethay uckfay?" She unwrapped it.

"It's a 78 rpm record—a rare copy I found of 'There's Yes! Yes! In Your Eyes' by Fry's Million Dollar Pier Orchestra, an instrumental on a Perfect label. A foxtrot. I picked it up for 25 cents at one of those yard sales we hit back there on the outskirts of Memphis."

"What's a foxtrot?"

"Are you serious?'

"You heard me, Glue Stick," she said.

"A dance," he said. "Upbeat. The banjo and trumpet sound on this is fantastic, the tiny strained 1920s sound." He motioned for her to put it back.

"It's brown."

"Ocher."

"Vinyl."

"Bakelite."

"Whatever.

"And I got these for you," said Eugene, sliding a couple of books from underneath the front seat and hoping to surprise her. "Fred Weber's *First Division Band Method for Piano* and *Tri-Chord Piano Music Selections* by Charles H. Hansen Music Corp., books that I thought you might be able to use." But his enthusiasms were dashed as Laura snapped off the radio, leaned back, and with a long impatient whoosh said, "What do they listen to out here, wind?"

"Let's talk." Silences at times bothered him. It was unnatural for two people to ride in a sterile vacuum, keeping a vigil in the darkness and leaking intoxication. He wanted to challenge her, to be challenged.

Eugene was curious about pretty much everything and, visibly irking Laura by fighting the virus of lost standards that he was convinced plagued the nation and of course knew had infected her, had tried to stop in as many museums as possible, and he did so, at least every one they came across from the Shoe Museum in Philadelphia to the National Cryptologic Museum in Fort George Meade, Maryland, to the American Sanitary Plumbing Museum in Worcester, Massachusetts, to the Banana Club Museum in Altadena, California, with its 17,000-plus items, to the Museum of Questionable Devices in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where upon seeing a foot-operated breast-enlarger there, one he pointed out, she became paranoiacally convinced that their visit there had been arranged on purpose. For her this was streetwalking on a ruined map. "No more," she said. "I can't stand this bullshit."

Eugene threw out with increasingly nervous energy all sorts of questions they could talk about or discuss as they drove through the hailstone-and-sarsaparilla belt. Why is rain thin? Why does a pig's orgasm last for thirty minutes? Why did John Wilkes Booth never fight for the Confederacy? Why in horror movies do girls always stand in front of windowpanes? (Fright was on his mind; in a motel in Kansas City Laura in the middle of the night suddenly sat bolt upright in the dark and screamed, "*I am someone else!*") Why are seed packets always 9/10ths empty? Why in large families do the oldest and youngest children always consider themselves an only child? Why is the death knell in horror flicks always the line, "I'll be right back"? Does absence make the heart grow fonder, or is it truer that out of sight is out of mind? Why was Abraham, an Iraqi, called a Hebrew patriarch? Why don't we know who killed Marie Rogêt? Why did Shakespeare never

mention canals in *The Merchant of Venice*? Why did Queen Victoria detest Oxford University intellectuals and academics in general? Why is Aspen wood alone used to stake vampires in the heart? Why did Dante Alighieri never mention Marco Polo? Why do first-basemen always look at the baseball after a third out is made before throwing it to the umpire? How come no one makes heavy weather of the fact that by the time we've begun school we've supposedly heard the word *no* something like 50,000 times? Was Emily Dickinson really in love with Kate Scott? Do many cooks spoil the broth or do many hands make less work? Was it a true fact that cats attached themselves to places, not people? Isn't *Do you believe in God?* the most important question—and maybe the first—that one person should ask of another? What is being said in the fact that the marten is more brutal during intercourse than the bear? Did a person's given name shape part of their fate? What was the circuitry that made decisions? Is the human face a bridge or a wall? What is a ptyx?

"Those piano books," said Laura, concocting something out of a slow burn, "the ones you gave me back there. What was that all about?" They had driven into legendary Podunk—Podunk Center, situated at a crossroads on U.S. 169, nine miles south of Winterset on the Iowa plains, and taken a room at a homemade four-unit hotel. "You seem to be interested in my creative abilities or the lack of them, correct me if I'm wrong, as if I'm supposed to be fixing a problem I fail to acknowledge?" She was sitting on the bed with a Dr. Pepper and a smothering sulk. "What, you take notes on me?" She took a gulp. "You take notes, right? I *see* you take notes, damn it."

He tried to diffuse her anger, "Check out the Wilpons yet?"

"*Private* notes."

"I'm interested in the you waking up to the dream of your vitality and not to the darkness of your delusions," he told her, climbing into his own bed. Had he dreamt it, wondered Eugene, or had he merely conjured out of nothing a sad image of Laura in one of those uninspired and disheartening wall-photos he had once seen on the stairway of her mother's apartment wearing a farm-style pastel dress and a skirt below her knees while sitting at a piano? "As to those notes you refer to, I do take notes—about everything. I admit it. Why not? I happen to be intrigued by the problem of creativity. The mystery of whether thought kills action. Whether one is being 'gnawed by lucidity' as one is being 'drained of instinct,' as the writer E. M. Cioran puts it. I think

it has led to a difference in the sexes. One goes either in the direction of nature or of art. That's all. It's not against you. I'm thinking of my own personal debility, wondering if I am in touch with my own impulses."

Eugene took out a notebook, flipped to a page, and read out loud:

"Homogeneous, undifferentiated, opaque vigor was idolized by the world of legends, by the fantasies of mythology. When the Greeks turned to speculation, the cult of the anemic ephebe replaced that of the giants; and the heroes themselves, sublime dolts in Homer's time, became, thanks to tragedy, bearers of torments and doubts incompatible with their rough nature."

"Bite me," said Laura, putting down her bottle. She pulled over covers and went to sleep.

One hot morning out in western Oklahoma just at that point where that state pokes its nose into New Mexico, they woke up early—"'Beautiful weather! The elephants are flying south,'" Eugene said, quoting Oliver Hardy and identifying him, and Laura asked, "Who?"—and drove more than a hundred and fifty miles in a gagging inferno, sweating like pigs in fleece and swallowing weather so warm it grew indigestible. Laura spent it staring out the window, snorging on Twizzlers. Eugene was worried about the car, for the air-conditioning system had been giving off filthy hot air. They pulled into an old one-bay garage around noon in order to get a fill of freon. "Freon at last! Freon at last! Great God A-Mighty, we have freon at last!" said Eugene, playfully tapping her knee as they got back on their way.

"Come again?" she asked.

Anything that happened before Laura was born was not so much ancient history to her as beyond the pale as far as anything that mattered. She was unhelpfully indifferent, worse than Mr. Harootootootoonian, the dumb penguin. She hadn't a clue about things like who Bunny Berigan was or what the significance of the Northwest Passage was or the true meaning of monasticism. Songs, singers, actors, wars, treaties, plays, the headlines of history, all, all left her cold. Anything that predated her birth was irrelevant. One time on the road they saw an old automobile, smooth-nosed and sleek in mint condition. "That's a Cord," said Eugene. "A *what*?" squawked Laura, wrinkling her nose in nauseous disapproval at the reality of anything at all. But Eugene

was idealistic. "Wouldn't you have loved riding in one of those old cars from the 1920s: a Moon? A Dort? A Jordan? The names alone of those old cars! A Grant Six! A Kenworthy! An Owen Magnetic! An Auburn! A Roamer! A Bay State! A Chandler! A Peerless! A Jewett! Or," asked Eugene "how about a Locomobile?"

Laura mordantly asked, "How about a rubber room?"

"You like movies. You claim to like movies," said Eugene. "Remember that scene in *Sunset Boulevard* where Erich von Stroheim as Max, Norma Desmond's butler and chauffeur, drives her and Joe Gillis to the Paramount lot? He's driving an old Isotta Fraschini with leopard upholstery!"

What did she know or care about the old days or anything to do with them? Why care a hoot anymore about cranberry scoops? Canvas bathtubs? The death of Mayakovsky? Grouch bags? The Ealing comedies? Burma-Shave signs? Neon clocks? Curved watches? Christmas Bubble Lites? The handcart pioneers of America? How to cook popovers? Where Nauru was? Linen-era or white-border postcards? Dirigibles? Matthew Arnold? The Emerald Buddha? Krazy Kat? Vera Lynn singing "The White Cliffs of Dover"? Dvorak? Cloche hats? How Russ Colombo was killed? The Armenian genocide? Lux Radio Theater? Victor Herbert? What did she care what happened at the Wheatfield or the Peach Orchard at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863, or what "Fletcherism" was? Or how taffy was churned? When young boys buttoned their ball-gloves by a strap to their belts or when microphones were called "enunciators"? Why there was a bare spot on each of a zebra's four legs just above the knee? Which was right, mothers-in-law or mother-in-laws? What injera was? A split infinitive? Tru-Ade? Bakelite dishes? White-tapered ice cream cartons? Teazles? Aggies and pedaps? Old Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey comedies? Lard squeezers? Wash sticks? Yarn winders? Harness-makers' vises? Br'er Rabbit Molasses? Herr Wolf and his moustache? Respighi? Fritz Lang's *The Secret Behind the Door*? Tabu perfume? Persepolis and Bam and the ancient tomb of Darius? Peg Entwhistle who jumped off the H? Dr. Coué? *Ragged Dick*? The Ford Plant hunger riots of 1932? Zinc bathtubs? Tito? Airplane pilots' leather hats? Speckled butcher's paper? Murad cigarettes? The on-deck circle? Tan-webbed radios? Platt & Munk books? Hurricane lamps? Mr. Keene, Tracer of Lost Persons? Pearl Harbor and Glenn Miller? Olga Nethersole in *Sappho*? Vulighters? Fly-front topcoats? A bucket of beer? Howard Johnson's hot

dogs served in a paper boat and flat-grilled burgers? The movie *Shane*? Botanist Gertrude Jekyll? The Berlin Wall, affectionately called by the GDR the "Antifascist Protective Barrier"? The destruction of Thira? Quink ink? Milkmen and milk bottles? Spats? Rumble seats and running boards on automobiles? Guy Lombardo and the Royal Canadians? The Grille Room at the Hotel Roosevelt? Knute Rockne? Nick and Nora Charles? General Jubal A. Early? Mainbocher? Ice-cube trays with levers? Telephone party lines? Refrigerators with snap-handles? Pull-chain toilets? Lollipop-top gas pumps? Coal chutes? Bicycle clips? Scruffy Shoe Polish? Race records? Rayon? Addison Mizener's architectural mish-mash that created Miami and made it the capital of gaucherie? Trans-Lux newsreel theaters? All-wool cheviot serge suits? Oak toilet seats? Linotype machines? Cast-iron stoves with circular wicks? Root beer barrels? Phosgene? Beatty Model F clotheswashers? Big tailor's shears? Peaches and Daddy Browning? Appian Way Pizza Sauce? Crosley radios? Captain Spaulding? Fred Karno? Dan Leno? John Bunny? Boxes of gingersnaps? Wide-brimmed Borsalinos? Circular wicks for kerosene stoves? Zoot suits? Christmas seals? Potato ricers? Tom Mix sitting cross-legged before a campfire, alone, drinking coffee out of a tin cup? Sardines? Lorgnettes? Anvils? Radio commercials ("Kellogg's Pep, the build-up wheat cereal with a prize in every package, invites you to share another thrilling adventure with . . . Mark Trail!")? The sales gospel according to Alfred C. Fuller who in the *Fuller Brush Manual for Salesmen* prescribed backing up two steps to dispel the housewives' fears and extending your arm to offer the bait (free gift) of a comb or a wire brush? James Mason and John Slidell? Cascarets ("They work while you sleep")? Reading a pony-wire? Joe & Nemo's? Streetcar transfers? Wardrobe trunks shaped like a Log Cabin syrup tin? Village millers? Liberty Cabbage? Traveling knife-grinders? Old movie-cowboys fanning the hammers of their six-guns? Caps? Women's bathing suits with chastity panels? Flat-irons? Brownie cameras? Fuller Brushes ("Head to foot, cellar to attic")? Smudge pots and canvas hoses? Za-Rex? Screen doors? Aluminum tumblers? Interwoven socks? L & M cigarettes? Old black DeSotos with electric fans? Googie coffee shops? Gertrude, the Pocket Books Kangaroo? Flav-R Straws? The great unfilled-in-ness of the American woods? Hand-operated card-shufflers? Corrugated Dixie Cups, complete with dispensers? Nativity scenes in public places? Third rails? Newspapers with stud-horse-type headlines and "second coming" type? Parlor stoves?

Rainwater cisterns? Joel McCrea oaters like *Ramrod* and *Saddle Tramp* and *Four Faces West*? "Roasting ears," as corn-on-the-cob was once called? The cartoons of John Held, Jr.? Weeping as Trevor Howard says goodbye to Celia Johnson in *Brief Encounter*? Pounding beefsteak? Spur Cola ("Zip in every sip")? Egg creams? Chocolate phosphates? Roxanola? Celery cola? Dr. Drake's Chinese Hair Cream? Long ago neighborhoods visited by itinerant knife-grinders, coal men, ice men, egg men, junk wagons, and of course doctors? What about ammonia ovals? Vermifuge powders? Sarsaparilla panels? Dance marathons? Who O. Soglow's *The Little King* was? The meaning of "Nov schmoz kapop"? Did she know that Mrs. Pringle was raped by Alexander Pantages? What about Robert Hall clothing? Ungraded roads? The March of Dimes? Handbills? Woodpecker cider? The glass flowers at the Agassiz Museum? The novels of G. A. Henty? *Mighty Joe Young*? Henry Aldrich? The Great Gildersleeve? "Big Little Books"? Dish Night at the cinema? Elsie Dinsmore books? Frozen pudding ice cream? The Ink Spots? Fatima cigarettes? Gibson girls? Dime Museums? Wrigley's electric fish? Trolley cars? Waleeco Bars? Barbasol? Shirtwaists? Old Town canoes? Shays's rebellion? Ether? The Sons of the Pioneers singing "The Everlasting Hills of Oklahoma"? When plastic was burped? When basements were called cellars and had wooden doors on bulkheads that you could slide down for fun? When *Variety* came out on Wednesdays? When automobiles had names like Maxwells, Studebakers, Appersons, and Haynes?

For Laura they did not exist. They never existed for her. Worst of all, she cared not a whit for any of it, and it reached its ipsissimus in the talk from which she turned, in the subjects she abhorred, in the questions she ignored, in the manner she got bored. It was all of it an aspect of her stubbornness, which is one of the worst aspects of stupidity. He was wedded to Laura, he saw once again, not through unison but through separation. Was her willful and insistent myopia only a variation of his own 6-60 vision, that period when in a state of near sightlessness he found himself groping about in the lost waste places of Vietnam? Were not both of them crippled? If in fact there are no straight lines in the human body, he wondered, why then should there be in the mind? She seemed to listen in the same way that she told the truth, by way of a slow and evolving paradigm that only she understood. She temporized by instinct. She seemed framed by nature and personality better to communicate by thought-balloon! There was no

looking backward for her, no wonder-pauses, no mystic revelation. He finally saw that she could not go back because she was a pawn. Pawns by their very nature cannot do so but move unmagically a bump at a time: bump, bump, bump. There had only been one pope, CCCP was a bunch of letters, popcorn had always been heated in a microwave oven, the Amazon was long, and the Drifters sucked. She had never heard of the Battle of Cold Harbor, did not care that Saint Luke the Evangelist wrote the Acts of the Apostles, could not fathom cultural life without having a remote control.

Although the questions he asked were inquiries and his inquiries an aspect of sharing, they immediately fell into a category of bullying that anyone acquainted with Laura Warholic's predilections may be excused for construing as challenges to her worth and therefore value.

"I know, I know," said Eugene. "'Don't you ask nothing but questions?' as Van Heflin as Joe Starrett as Yogi Berra somewhat bewilderingly inquires of his son, Brandon De Wilde as Little Joe in the movie *Shane*."

"It's not that."

"What is it?"

"Who are those fucks that I should care?" asked Laura Warholic whenever Eyestones mentioned a historical name or author or event merely in passing. "And if I should care, why should I begin with these fucks?" Whenever she did pick up a book, a classic perhaps that Eyestones had pressed upon her, she would never finish it, yet even trashy ninth-rate novels she threw aside. She preferred instead lame romances and Reader's Digest Condensed Books and snatched-off-the-racks paperbacks of the self-help variety like *Focusing* or *Lose Weight by Apple Vinegar* or *The Soap Opera Syndrome*. "Listen to this," she said, quoting from the latter. "'Many women who feel powerless and insecure and who are concealing a deep, denied reservoir of past anger or hurt, thrive on the risk and excitement of breaking laws, selecting strong—and self-selected—sensations to snuff out their inner pain.' That's Gayle!"

"Who?"

"Gayle Bagel, my enemy friend."

"And it has nothing to do with you?" he asked flatly.

"Sorry."

"Nothing?"

"Nope."

"And denial is a river in Egypt, right?"

Telegony, telegony, thought Eyestones.

Her brain was simply a studioful of refusals. She was hot. She was cold. She didn't want ginger ale. She wanted carrot juice. She would eat the slice of bread. She would not touch the crust. "I don't like American beer." "Not exactly the Hotel de Dream." "This food is worse than the slop at that crappy Irish bar in Shoemaker Plain." She brought disapproval to ideas the way heat kills thiamine and vitamin C. One pointless night in Oregon, turning around to head back east, they got into a furious argument, not only because she characteristically would not try tasting the fried clams but for the larger issue it pointed to, that nothing pleased her, no road pleased her, no song pleased her, no dream pleased her, no man pleased her, no *job* pleased her: teacher, flight attendant, nurse, legal secretary, whatever. "I want to be a psychological counselor," she once demoted out of the blue. "*What?*" cried Eyestones, completely astounded, "with no education for it?" "Rightrightrightright," she rattled out, as if being bullyragged by him. Was she being ironic? He inquired, "To help disturbed people?" "I've seen pain and I can help." "But you've seen nothing. Nothing."

Whenever he asked Laura a question, she did not respond or even look like she was going to respond either because she was listening to her headset and rocking back and forth, shouting, "Bang your head! Bang your head!" or "Rock the Casbah" or "Feel the noise" or "Jiggy!" or "They're so hot!" or "Shove it up the air!" But it was much more characteristic of her in a dark, unobliging mood merely to stare insolently—intentionally—back at you after a question with an empty, platelike face. It often seemed she had not heard the question, but of course she always had. Answers, formulations, in a sense, however, called upon her in ways that she resented, and she was uneasy with the challenge of mere exchange. Nor did responses of any kind come easily to her. It was about her humorlessness, her inattention, her *lenteur.* The problem was not so much that she couldn't think on her feet, as that she did not feel that anyone had the right to ask her to. She appreciated nothing, nothing, never sent thank-you notes, and generally assumed gifts and favors were her due after all the neglect she had tallied in her history of injustice-collecting. Manners with her, in short, were as rare in the twentieth century as an emotionally supportive two-parent family. She hated and feared authority, on any level. She was indolent, but had not so much an aversion to corporate grey or office-like dullness as to the fact of working. She had the slacker men-

tality of the Massachusetts state-worker—sarcastic, lazy do-nothings with poisonous attitudes, sulking, inattentive, always asking for raises, demanding holidays, calling in sick, doing a poor job with complete indifference. She was careless and unthinking in so many ways. She exploded eggs in the microwave oven by forgetting to shell them, and when she did make breakfast it was lampwick bacon and talcum-powder biscuits and thin disgusting coffee that tasted like a Wassermann test. She left unwashed dishes in the sink and let bathtubs overflow by failing to figure out a simple tap-turn. Was it any wonder she had let a pet canary die? Once she bought a brand-new hose and because it leaked returned it, failing to understand that merely pushing in the provided oval gasket at the nozzle was required. She frequently defended her incompetence and inattention by self-servingly pointing to her art, but the artwork she did, the scratches she made, when they were not overcolored brocades misconfiguring nature, were a hasty assault on numinous quadrilaterals, crosses, triangles marching about in search of each other, modernistic bollocks, a whistle-while-you-wait, perfunctory filling-in that always went carefully fussy at the edges of shapes.

Storms arose: they often fought, suddenly and frighteningly. Mainly, Laura kept stonily silent at such times. She could be recessive to the point of inertia. Intractable. Her exasperated consciousness showed itself as withered, where in such instances she would register neither preference nor opposition. He felt that she would come around, that the windows of her personality would open of their own accord. He would try to prod her alive, but it was the kind of inquisitively labile sympathy that, playing over all the varying accounts she gave of her past, simply allowed for more dissembling. It was true, on occasion she rose to a response and there were answers to his questions, but they were vague and maddeningly out of reach, so that at the end of the day he was forced to see that, generally, her only contact with the truth was to long for it. It was difficult to make up with her. She found any sentiment blubbery—"sappy" was one of her favorite put-downs—and whenever he tried to make up with her after an argument or a fight, she was soon mocking him with unadorned ridicule and the kind of contemptuous skepticism that made a significant side of her so hard and metallic that one felt one could play handball off it.

"What's that?" she asked.

"On the radio? It's a news rebroadcast. About when U.S. troops

first went off to Southeast Asia."

"When?"

"Back in 1961," said Eugene. "The only year you can turn upside-down."

Laura simultaneously closed her eyes and raised her eyebrows in faux resignation.

"NPR," murmured Laura. Eugene said nothing. "Right?" she asked, taking a long comb to the fanfaronade of her hair. "National Public Radio. I know. Discknickers told me that the entire goddam network is owned, run, staffed, and broadcast by a cabal of subterranean Jewish wirepullers. That's exactly what he said—'a cabal of subterranean Jewish wirepullers.' He made me listen to the names of the broadcasters and stringers who work there. 'Yentas and yammerers' he called them. He claims all of them are Zionists. He accuses them of fleecing listeners, especially all those dopey, gullible contributors who telephone in pledges. It's a total flim-flam run by hucksters, he says. They actually run commercials on air which they say they don't. They receive government subsidies. But guess what? All the while they run those incessant fund drives ("We need $175,000 in the next five minutes!")—a trifecta!—a re-replenishing pot of gold from which they all pay themselves huge salaries, some much higher than six-figures, which at the same time they refuse to disclose. So you don't agree?" Eugene said nothing. It was not NPR playing on the radio. Their phony quotient was insufferable. He could not bear the long-winded segments, the self-indulgent interviews always accompanied by something like crickets chirping in the background or Nigerian drums beating or pile-drivers thunking away on some building site in order to establish fake authentica. He particularly hated those arch posturing snobs with fruity, self-cherishing, plumulaceous voices on shows like "All Things Considered" and "Weekend Edition."

"What would you prefer?" he asked, lowering the volume and darkly experiencing in a ghastly moment of infernal revelation a vision of a 1970s block party, music supplied by Seals and Crofts's "Get Closer," one of the proofs for him of Original Sin. "A soothing medley of the Doobie Brothers' 'What a Fool Believes,' Redbone's 'Come and Get Your Love,' Free's 'All Right Now,' Orleans's 'Dance with Me,' 'Rock the Boat' by the Hues Corporation?"

"I can't stand that fuddy-duddy station," she squawked, flipping the car radio dial and, unable to find anything, after awhile shut it off and

began to sing in a loud voice and with almost talismanic accuracy,

> "I belong to the Blank Generation, but
> I can take it or leave it behind
> Oooo-ooo-ooo, ooo-ooo-ooo, ooo . . ."

She paused. "What?"

"Nothing."

"You don't like it."

"I do. I do like it," he said, laughing. "It makes me think *I* can sing. It's not difficult. I'm sure I can sing. Want me to sing '*Parlami d'amore, Mario*,' an Italian song that I learned years ago?"

"No.

"But *you* sang," he chided.

She put her feet up on the dashboard. "No way, José."

"How about Georgie Jessel's 'My Mother's Eyes,' a sentimental hit from the Thirties?"

"No way. No fucking way, Dungeon Master," she screamed, laughing out the window.

So he treated her and sang,

> "Puddin' Head Jones was fat and funny
> dumber than sticks and stones.
> That is just why the kids all called him
> wooden head, Puddin' Head Jones"

and

> "I wanna meander with Miranda
> in the twilight, where the hollyhocks grow.
> I wanna meander with Miranda
> 'Cause I love Miranda so."

and

> "The sky was full of moon,
> the moon was full of smiles,
> and I was full of joy and ecstasy.
> So I raised my hat,

she raised her eyes.
It was easy as A-B-C.
The trees were full of birds,
the birds were full of song,
the song kept saying, Kiss her tenderly.
So I raised my arms,
she raised her lips,
and now she belongs to me.
I said, 'Would you like to cuddle?
Would you like a little bit of love?'
She said, 'Course I'd like to cuddle,
what do you think that I'm made of?'
And now we have a house,
the house is full of rooms,
of course you know we've got a nursery.
'Cause I raised my hat,
she raised her eyes
now we're raising a family."

"Blecch!" said Laura, feigning to stick her finger down her throat. She was ill-at-ease with sentiment, the legacy of all girls who have had a bad relationship with their emotionally distant father, or so felt Eugene. It was the reason she disliked taking photographs, as if with a shudder recalling or remembering anything were so much less cool than inattention. Almost all the point-and-shoot photos they took with Duxbak's old Nikon F were, they saw at the end of the trip, except for a few good ones—a sea of comic-looking sunflowers, endless buttes, and a grizzled old whiskerando with a beard making an obscene gesture from a railroad car in Sacramento—a bundle of misshot examples of hot spots, light fall-off, double exposures, lens flares, shaken camera, and crude vignetting.

And as always, from the first, Laura kept that weird little private journal of hers in which, keeping a running but prejudiced tally, she wrote down every bad thing she could think of about Eugene to make herself feel better not only after they fought, but, or so she explained, as a fortifying hedge against the day that he would leave her, as she knew he would—it was inevitable, she told herself. Hadn't all the others, every single one of them? Why was Eugene any different? No, she had her suspicions. After the trip, as well as before, animated as

much by a kind of panic hangover borne of her conviction that she was becoming increasingly alienated from him, she had three or four times pried into his desk and several times when left alone in his rooms had opened and read certain letters to him. Men were untrustworthy. They had to be watched. And so Laura would sit up in the near-dark, whether by candlelight or moonlight, in motel or hotel or camp, summarily making her nightly entries, usually sitting in a far corner, always awkwardly gripping her pen almost solely by overlapping thumb and forefinger, silent, vindictive, with her nose dripping if she'd been crying, filling page after page with a vengeful boustrophedontic scribble, often like her letters, always like herself.

But then in the end who was she, Constance Quesnet—or Quonstance Cesnet?

XXIX
Third Side of the Coin

At one point, somewhere in one of the rectangle states—because of which it later became known in Eyestones's mind as "Malocciovillе"—Laura, for so long a lite-FM refugee, tired of listening to Bread and Elton John and Gordon Lightfoot and the Carpenters, yanked off her earphones and said she was feeling nervous. Non-specific chronic anxiety, she called it. It was one of those sudden attacks that came over her, reflecting as she was, no doubt, on her fecklessness for only the day before she had opened and read for the first time a troubling letter from her father that he had sent months before, a censorious one asking what she was doing with her life. Eugene told her to believe in herself and offered her some Good & Plentys. She waved them away in a bad mood. She had tried to do some drawings in Chattanooga of a girl majorette during a parade on July 13, when the entire state of Tennessee was closed down for a holiday for General Nathan Bedford Forrest, "The Wizard of the Saddle," planter and slave-trader, and the worthy contribution they felt he had made to the national dream by founding the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski on Christmas Day 1865. Laura dashed off a quick satirical painting on the way out of Muldrow, Arkansas, after a suspicious ("You 'Mercan?") and illiterate ("Cain't hardly tell") shopkeeper in a small general store there who insulted her to Eugene ("You can put lipstick on a hog and call it Daisy Mae, hoss, but it's still a hog") after she had cantankerously refused to pay for a bag of potato

chips she insisted had already been opened and then did a charcoal of a cross-eyed Negro who with a gleeful shriek saluted her from a half-broken doorway with his virile member in Poussaint, Louisiana, an insignificant black hole not even on the map—they had taken a bite out of a narrow lane to a dead end, chewed it on four wheels, and spit it back—that they could not leave fast enough. After stopping for lunch in Mangham, Louisiana, the place where the Reverend Jimmy Swaggart, ninth-grade drop-out and budding evangelist, gave his very first sermon—a ten-minute spiel about Hitler—at the tender age of eighteen, they continued to head west, stopping at a supermarket for food, a new thermos jug, and full tank of gas. Traveling all night, they passed through St. Louis where Laura tried to do a sketch of the Arch from some distance, looking up, looking down, *scratch*, looking up, looking down, *scratch*, looking up, looking down, *scratch scratch*. But she ripped it up. Eugene's eyes often ached on the extra-long drives that they took on certain days, and he was never quite certain if the phototropic passages through Dixie helped or hurt. Rummaging in her green JanSport over-the-shoulder bag, Laura muttered, "My mother gave me a bunch of pills—tranqs, Pamelos, Buprenex. They're somewhere here."

She also produced some cookies.

"You boosted those, didn't you? Back there in that convenience store?" She coolly disregarded him and continued to search her knapsack. "Deny it."

"I was just—"

"Deny it."

"Jesus, you sound like my father. *Deny it! Deny it!* Every fucking time that I—"

"Please."

A black frost descended in the car.

"Every fucking time that—"

"Oh let it fade, Sparkley," begged Eugene. "OK?" Laura indignantly threw a burrito supreme out the car window, slouched down, and looked away, steaming, a reddening spinel of anger flushing the cheeks of her small pale face. She was stubborn as a mule and whenever caught in a lie always feebly reverted to the locutions of the scolded: "I just—" "I only—" "I intended to—" For a minute he thought of parking the car, handing her the keys, and running out alone on the fly to catch a freight-train, preferably a highball racing past Chicago, out of the rust bowl, and into California with the wind in his hair on

a fugue in the sunshine, jungling up to hobos, winos, rubbertramps, and road people and be shut of Laura for good. He had a headache as bad as one he had had back in Bien Hoa during a rainy season after a retinal operation that so immobilized him that he was forced to lie flat on his back for thirteen straight days with his head braced between two sandbags and a fistful of LSD tabs, which helped him stay safely upright flying in a mind-warp through the jale-and-ulfire-colored muspel light to the planet Tormance and Arcturus, to the Rann of Kutch and the Darjak of Novi-Bazar, to Bukovina and Bessarabia, to Tama Tuva with its kumiss-drinking nomads, double-throated yodelers, and triangular postage stamps, to the Egyptian well of Al-Goleah where the sun is always directly overhead, to Cymric Llaggerub, to rain-soaked Cherrapunji, and to sun-parched Ethiopian Dallole. Although sensations are conducive to the mind and its vitality, Eyestones realized in the stabbing pain he felt of those sharp ghost-coat, glowstick phosphenes flashing at him in his memory and recollections what he again now faced in relation to Laura's awfulness and, as the eye reverses light and shadow instead of more properly appraising them as does the magnifying glass, how to feel is to be distracted. He had read it in the pages of Pessoa of course but until that dead state on his back had neither experienced it nor felt it by the actual fact of paradox, the method by which he was now learning so much:

> The fields, after all, are not as green
> for those who are loved
> As for those who are not.
> To feel is to be distracted.

He drove a mile, miles, in painful silence, tired of Laura's shape-shifting unpredictability and fighting with fatigue both glaring headlights and moral irresponsibility. He could be a fruitcake himself. But clearing-housing groceries and nobbling snacks right under an owner's nose?

"You should *try*, Magrinha, can't you? Please? Just try to regard yesterday as a period of death?"

She looked spiritless.

"It is, you know. Your yesterday. It's a noose."

He waited. Don't most comatose people usually retain at least their sense of hearing?

"It is, you know."

"I thought you were the one who liked history."

"History, yes, Laura. Not the self-pity of how yesterday went wrong."

"You know so fucking much," snapped Laura, touchy as paint, perching up to find her breath in quick, angry gulps. Her necrokleptoretentive hands jumped as if to pinch him. "I tell you something about this or that, and you have to fucking spend a psychological *weekend* on it! Was it because you wet the bed when you were young and your disapproving parents screamed at you that you're so pessimistic? Mistrust the past? Hate the future? I can see you as a sad little squirt." She swallowed bile. "You do have stones for eyes, big man."

"The future isn't what it used to be."

"You're so critical! 'Deny it! Deny it!' Five minutes of that, you know something, is more bullshit than anyone can take, including me. Right?"

No answer.

"Right?" she screamed.

No answer.

"I rest my case."

Rest your face.

Resting was all she did, thought Eugene with pained reflection. She who rarely bothered to write to anyone herself—not a postcard, except to her granny—typically complained that she never received any letters herself. Except for only a few ragged sexual imbeciles and completely asocial and maladjusted undetermineds, she literally had no friends, which was sad, but it was simply the result of her doing nothing *for* anyone. She drew his pity. She was from the lake effect snow area where, for all he knew, people had penguin flaps and webbed feet. He had a vision of *her* when young as a waif, a disaffected girl, thin as eel-grass, wandering along the barren edge of a shore somewhere, Lake Ontario or Oneida Lake—wasn't Syracuse up around there somewhere?—where her parents, ignoring her and her sisters, spent their lives sitting in rooms or in cars bickering over a marriage that was already further than foundering. Starved for attention, Laura probably endured many such moments, growing up in emotional quicksand, living day in and day out if not with detached indifference than with the frightening possibility of the imminent departure of those two selfish progenitors. She had grown up doing what she wanted, the leeway she

was given having been the result of neither goodwill nor generosity but of parental neglect. It was an aspect of critical abuse that Laura in receiving passed on, as he saw when she admitted to the guilt she felt for beating her retarded sisters. Just as she eventually learned things about Eugene, finding him bookish, impatient, complicatedly eccentric, and a person who often made melancholy. He learned of more personal things about her. His disapproval became a mirror of what she soon saw she needed to hide and to avoid. On that trip but even before, he clearly saw she had become the dark source of his columns. She was a dark Rorschach blot he was determined to puzzle out.

Laura, he came to see, because she was a failure, sought fusion, not pleasure. She resented what repudiated her. Her intractability and slothful hypokinesia and revenge anthems, while they made Eugene aware that there were two sides to most questions—isn't much of the nature of coupledom merely the nexus of sexual dialectics?—came from a family to which even she herself had no access, and whenever he looked for any, there was no portrait, only a sort of "margin of the inexpressible," an impenetrable obscurity like the *sfumata* that the old painters substituted for contours.

Her situations were states. From the reveries of her life with Warholic, who always had the whip hand, which was unfair, he came to see how vindictive she could be, especially about former acquaintances, both male and female, and of course mostly about her former husband whom she vilified at her every turn. She bought attitude and sold arrogance. He knew that her father, whose picture she once showed him—he looked like a dog-show judge—was a weak, ineffectual prat, but her mother, he came to see, was also a major disappointment. She complained by implication that she was given short shrift by *her* mother whom she implied had saved money she would not share until she died, but it was the same way with her mother who in oblique ways never failed to make it clear to Laura, for all her to-ing and fro-ing, had in fact let *her* down. "I'm not going to be negative," says the political candidate, thereby implying that his or her opponent has already done so, and so becomes negative in the very act of denying it. She whinged and bitched and felt ill-used by anyone more successful than she whom she credited, soullessly, with having had more luck or better parents or richer friends. It was life in retrograde, he sadly realized. Had he told her too many stories of Ace Backwards, The Man Who Did Everything in Reverse? In the first weeks of traveling, Eugene tried to find

common ground with her, even on certain days feel good, but the best he could feel in her company, he eventually had to concede to himself, was, weakly, by way of backformed affirmations: ert, ept, kempt, gruntled, and shoveled. She suffered bitterly from class envy and could mount an entire antinomian attack on anyone with the slightest advantages. She entertained a whole battery of revenge-driven fantasies that dealt with offending "good" people, wealthy people, lucky people, handsome people, naturopaths and fashionistas, people much luckier than she was and from whom she felt estranged and ostracized and with whom she was at loggerheads. She alluded, in passing, to people whom she had met at her various jobs over the years—Susan, Wendy, Neil, Lawrence, Dan, Lamont, et al.—and yet never said a positive word about a single one of them.

They traveled, it seemed endlessly, like the wandering Israelites and the stages of their journey, as of old, were just like desert encampments. They left Mount Hor and camped at Zalmonah. They left Zalmonah and camped at Punon. They left Punon and camped at Oboth. They left Oboth and camped at Iye Abarim on the border of Moab. But where was the Jordan? When would they enter Canaan?

It was somewhere along the Arizona border, desolate beyond words, that, given Laura's inexplicable highs and lows, Eyestones recalled Discknickers icily referring to her as "Bergkeller," a word that seeemed to fit her, as it was a kind of psychoschizosocko summary of her mind. Wasn't her own mother a cautionary tale that way? What of her sisters, speaking of questions with no correct answers? Even her grandmother seemed an unnerving reminder of family instability, if the painting he had seen at their Newburyport flat that Laura had done of her—a ceramic vase with a narrow throat under a tiny head and a wide ballooning body below—had been anything close to an authentic reproduction. Didn't such a diagnosis of her find its objective correlative for him in the insane orange dress and terrifying spectacles she was wearing at the time? In her peevish dismissal of her friends? In her sullenness? In her fanboy ecstasy? In her unparalleled cheapness? One instance especially stood out. They had screeched to a stop and backed up to a garage sale table at the edge of a stickerpatch ballpark at the side of an empty highway in Texas. Laura fixed with fascination on a turquoise lanyard.

"How much is—" Laura stretched to point and put cuteness into her voice, "that?"

"Seventeen."

"What about ten?" she asked, lamely.

"Fourteen."

Laura snorted impatiently, and Eugene saw the man look up and raise his prawn-whisker eyebrows.

"Ten."

The seller's old booze-crumpled face under a dingy stained Stetson was a cold plate. He had a twisted yellow mustache, seemed deaf but not irritable, and was very attentive to everything he heard. He had thin legs, was a spitter, and nodding to his goods used the words "them" as a pronominal adjective. He closed his eyes impassively and said, "How's about thirteen?"

"Ten dollars," she unbudgingly declared and made to leave, moving artificially away bowlegged as a Korean in her slow-walking duplicity.

A wind rose and blew a contrail of cloud over the touristless plains. Eugene stood by, embarrassed. Cowboys don't do helpless, he knew. Or cute. The old man shrugged sadly but this time relented. Laura quickly handed him a bill and skipped to the car ahead of Eugene.

They drove away. Eugene cupped his hot eyes, which began to hurt. After some minutes he shook his head, and then in quiet admonishment he said to Laura, who was running her finger around the lanyard, "Fourteen was right. That wasn't Wronarski's Pawn Shop. You should always leave something on the table."

"Like what?"

"Anything."

"Double fuck to that."

"But don't you see that—?"

"*Your oinky Wonderbread self!*" she snapped, going white-lipped in indignation.

Discknickers must have seen this sort of thing for his knowing appraisal. The way Eugene got it he at one point had some sort of relationship with Laura over the course of a week or two and then as was his wont, dropped her flat. As Laura's anger and envy were particularly evoked by attractive women, she was nagging him within days. "The image you want," Discknickers told Eyestones the morning after Laura had seen him with a beautiful companion, "is of the perennial hosta suffering the ignominy of bright sun, which by exposure turns the plant a sickly, sickly pale green."

She had bad body odor. There were hot days when the car smelled

positively fetid, something like acetone or a kind of burnt animal horn. It was almost atmospheric. Didn't odor have weight? If it reaches the nose, obviously it is evaporating, no? Her offenses showed up. Flaws are objects. There *are* objective correlatives. What did she eat? Was it from protein metabolism? He was convinced that she did not drink enough water. The more proteins we eat, he knew, the more water we must drink. He was depressed, as he was at the unattractive mole on her body that sprouted hairs she never snipped, at how much, of an antifetish it was. The odor was not always there. Or if it was, it improved—after a shower or in the rain or when the wind came up in the Colorado mountains when she smelled earthy, gamey, barnyardy like vine made from a dry-grape variety, and it was at such times that he reminded himself of the possibilty, if she ever met the same kind of hamhanded oaf who thrived as she did in the cascading night, of her becoming relatively content. What was it R. D. Laing said about mad people, they think they are sane and everybody else is mad, and who's to say they are wrong?

Eyestones, thinking of airplane metaphors, tried to ignore it all by way of accepting the inevitable. An airplane always flies slowly, nose-high. One cannot have lift without drag, and more lift costs more drag.

At the Grand Canyon, Laura was happy, and sitting on the lip of a lovely rise one late afternoon, the streaked sky touched with amethyst, they broke out a bottle of wine bought especially for the occasion. She sat on a long black rock, shining in the sun, which gave the effect of a white sheet. How could a black object come to look white in such a way? he wondered. The phenomenon takes place, he saw, when the sun strikes the edge of an angle. Angle, black, white, it was all of it a metaphor for all she presented to him, he thought, and flapping out a blanket for them to sit on he asked,"What did God say when, impressed, he first saw the Grand Canyon? 'Oh Myself!'" She laughed. He felt a bit guilty, however, remembering the movie *Kitty Foyle* when to the strains of "I'll See You in My Dreams," Dennis Morgan pours for Ginger Rogers a wine called Strega and utters those lovely romantic words, "They say if two people drink it together, they will never drink it apart."

Why guilty? That particular infinity he was sure would never be—at least with her, he concluded. It was the very last thing in the world that he wanted. Was he only superstitiously and ungenerously saying

something out loud, only to ward it off? Don't we die every moment, as Saint Paul says, so we can disarm death by rehearsing it in the here and now in the self-bestowals in life?

Most of the trip that summer was uphill, however. Laura always wanted to stop for Cokes or to send postcards to her batty grandmother or to buy packets of greasy french fries, which she rarely shared. It took her forever to read a restaurant menu. She never ordered breakfast without boring waitresses rigid with no end of menu algebra, asking, "Listen, can you bring me home fries instead of ham and substitute bacon for orange juice but forget the buckwheat pancakes?" She fussily insisted that grapefruit juice be hugely diluted with water and that eggs be scrambled but not hard. She treated motel-workers like whores, never thanked a clerk for anything, and was either constantly complaining about the heat ("Slim people with thin blood cannot withstand high temperatures") or bitching about the cold ("Thin people with slim bodies don't have enough protective fat for warmth"). Laura hated nature, however, and continued to prefer the artificial environments—America the Faux—offered by shopping malls, theme parks, laughable restorations, supermarts, places like Flavorland, Eatville, Huntbusters, and Shop-o-Rama, where the authentic was neither admired nor desired. Here one saw Americans at their rudest, appropriating two parking spaces with their cars, standing pat in the middle of department store aisles with their wide bodies and fat asses while blocking others from passing, hogging the center of escalators, shoving in front of you without a word of apology. Eugene heard the angry cynicism of Ratnaster: "Americans don't work anymore. They watch TV, eat, watch videos, sleep, and spend their entire weekends in the mall going recreationally shopping." Laura flourished in the malls, Eugene soon saw, who realized that if you have seen one, you've seen the Mall. She loved the food courts, the long arcades, the specialty shops, and all the cut-rate stores like Bradlee's, Marshall's, and T.J. Maxx, outside of which in a suffocating car somewhere Eugene would sit and wait for her while reading a copy of *New Yorker* and trying to entertain himself, in vain, with the usual weekly fare it offered: the article on Amazon rain-forests; another puff on horse-faced Martha Graham (or was that Diana Vreeland looking for a bale of hay?); an overlong profile of some L.A. civic leader (always secular, photograph by Annie Liebowitz); the usual ongoing mockery of Christianity (comment, criticism, covers, etc.) without which no issue is complete; all the

silly feuilletons; the standard five or six incomprehensible cartoons, spearheaded of course by the weekly appearance of someone named BEK (dud of a drawing, thud of a caption); yet another interminable piece about orchids; and of course always a bad poem (in translation) by some recently deceased Polish writer with a name like Wladlislaw Xyzcazzxinski. In his peremptory dismissal of the magazine, V. S. Naipaul was right, thought Eyestones: "The *New Yorker* knows nothing about writing. Nothing." The piped-in Muzak and incessant loudspeaker music Laura heard as she shopped sounded with its torturing angularity a lot like her. She who felt diminished and mocked by the casual triumphalism of prettier girls would often rudely cut in front of them in the aisles, registering her obvious disdain by means of subtle shoving and cold, envenoming stares. There are no accidents—Jung was correct. Laura was her mother. She was her father as well as she barged up and down the aisles and around the clothes racks in huffing dissatisfaction, furiously shuttling the hangers left and right, right and left, searching for that one skirt or blouse that she never, ever found, or stopping to hold up a dress in front of a mirror with alternating poses determined to find a prettier self, which was just as elusive. It was in satisfaction that Laura found her biggest defeat.

"I'm hot," said Laura.

"It's August, it's noon, it's the plains," he said with impatient sarcasm. "To get the humidity, add the dewpoint and the temperature and divide by two—and after for maximum comfort subtract yourself."

As they rode along, Laura, who was imperviously taciturn, seemed boxed in, mute, with virtually nothing to say about anything unless prodded to conversation by an allusion to sex or rock music. Curiously, Eyestones preferred the latter to the former, keeping things at a surface level, for real intimacy with someone so unthinkably troubled and so improbable and so explicitly a refrigerant to him was out of the question. She told him that she habitually masturbated at night to cheer herself up. No, there were no exhilarating bottles of Strega with bells on being poured on that trip, and no expectation of it. He could simply not make love to her after she refused to take an AIDS test, of which she was terrified—a disclosure she made, not incoincidentally, in the underdeck of a suffocating place called Show Low, Arizona—while characteristically refusing to see his side of the argument. She was a big crêpe-hanger and always managed to see a tunnel at the end of the light. Laura bristled with attitude, with a fortress mentality, he came to

see, not unlike a martial art, something like beautiful Snow knew such as *pentjak silat,* that ancient form of self-defense. Laura's uncompromising stubbornness was frustrating. But born of an ego it really was not. It was an impasse of her own making, with roots in presuppositions logic could never allay. She felt doom not only in the memory of herself being neglected and in the thought of going nowhere in her life but in her resentful plainness and unoriginal reflections, sullen in the knowledge, poor spotted moth, that the brightest butterflies make the longest migrations. "I would travel if I had money," said Laura, typically annoyed, sitting in a booth in a roadside diner perched on a half-hill of spicebushes somewhere west of the Rockies as she drank a straight bourbon and toyed over a thick steak the size of a dictionary. "Greece. Thailand. But not on a spit-and-coupon airline, like the time I went to Prague. The plane landed fucking everywhere, even though I had asked for a direct flight."

"A nonstop flight was what you wanted," said Eugene, trying to be helpful.

"What?" she asked, chewing.

Laura: aural, he thought. Didn't she ever listen? Or was she drunk? "Direct flight tickets only go in the same direction but stop en route," he said. He spoke in a soft voice, always with that odd musical rising at the end of each sentence. But she hated his smugness.

"Thanks a lot," she said, holding up one finger. "I was only going in one direction, all right?" She took out a piece of gristle. "Not even a dumb bird needs a compass going north to south, Muffin Pants. I'm sorry you've such a low opinion of me. You sound like Twelve." She sneezed. She had one of the most peculiar sneezes he had ever heard. "Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't sound like it."

"I hear you five by five," said Eugene, leaning back. "I act like twelve."

"I said you *sound* like Twelve. My girlfriend? The one I told you about who was with me at the Cheap Trick concert? Listen, why don't you."

"I was only trying to help you. Anyway," he said, "for your information, not all birds setting their courses by the stars—and the earth is a magnetic field generated by the fluid iron moving in its core—migrate north to south. I know that's not what we're doing. Some travel east

and west or sail down from high elevations to lower valleys. Many species of birds stay put year-round." *Lucky birds*, he thought. "Some South America birds actually fly north when the weather gets cold, and seabirds often circle the Atlantic or Pacific."

"'*O, la paloma blanca*, I'm just a bird in the sky,'" Laura sing-sang sarcastically. He laughed and decided to shut up as he paid for her dinner, but what the hell was it with these Generation Xers, he wondered, all these quaquaversal fifty-eight million Americans born between 1964 and 1978 who, lacking any defining moments in history, seemed to live their lives in such a bankrupt and meaningless way: skeptical, gormless, poorly read, unchallenged, unskilled, suspicious of ritual, hollow inside, and ignorant of all around them.

One afternoon in Yuma, Arizona, near the Kofa Game Reserve, when a funeral cortège held them up at a street crossing in a thunderstorm that sounded like the opening of *Finlandia* and Eugene told Laura, "To pass a funeral in Vietnam is considered good luck," she began angrily questioning him in a mood that came out of left field about the women there, how many he had slept with, and why. "Wasn't there some slope named Rain or Snow or Hurricane Sally over there that you almost married or something?" "Slope?" asked Eugene coldly, looking into her face. Am I with a ventriloquist, he wondered, or has this person been invented complete with handles from the worst bitch I know? "Slope?" "Peasant," said Laura, not trying to be helpful. "I don't want to discuss it," he said. Neither did she. For four days.

Rain often prevailed after the sun came out.

They argued a lot. Amid hot hollyhocks. On boats. Inside, on stairways. Outside, surrounded by traffic or trees. Under desert skies with their hot-and-cold mixes of orange, blue, and black. "We are neither together nor separate, neither head nor tail. I think we should turn back," said Eugene. "We are always on the edge—what you inventively refer to as the 'third side of the coin.'" *You are my friend and enemy*, he thought with rue, reprehending himself for having suggested the damn trip in the first place, *like your frenemy Gayle Bagle you always talk of or was it Eagle Beagle*? They bickered in a tour-bus at the Gettysburg battlefields where the mere presence of an anonymous young girl made her suspicious of Eugene; at a red outdoor umbrella-table in Correctionville, Nebraska; in a thrift shop in Hatboro, Pennyslvania, where Laura broke a peach-blow vase that she refused to pay for; at a rib-joint in Bucyrus, Missouri, which she blamed on a Popsicle

headache; at Bullhead City, Arizona, where the grilling heat so exacerbated the shouting, or vice versa, that in the shimmering mirages it seemed they both grew unidentifiable—gaping, red-faced, and bloated with fluttering hair; in a puppyshit-colored vinyl breakfast nook in Santa Fe eating tasteless omelets under rings of *ristras*; at a scarred bar booth in Tuscumbia, Alabama, over wet potato chips; flying down a hot highway in Arizona when she petulantly hurled a magazine of his out the car window—"Discknickers called the *New Yorker* the worst Jewish magazine in the United States, so what do you care?"—after he criticized her for spending more than $5 on a punk 'zine; in Knockemoffen, Ohio, where on a 95-degree day a smug Laura would not let a dog into the air-conditioning as she lapped an ice cream cone and Eugene refused to speak to her on the principle that she who will be faithless to little, will be faithless to much; inside a cinema complex in Snowmass, Colorado, while watching an old movie, *The Big Noise*, considered even by loyal fans to be the worst Laurel and Hardy film ever, but made even worse by Laura hating it so much; and later at several chi-chi piano-patios in Los Angeles, not only in the cool of the morning but at night over drinks and in the steamy, sweaty heat clamping that aimless, uncentered, cultureless excuse for a city by the throat at noon, when reproachful sheets of Seurat-dotted smog left the air white with a hot disgusting fizz. Laura would be perspiring like a boiler, when her gaumed shirts that were rumpled could no more be disguised than her acrid breath as in anger in whatever place, on whatever spot, she would be driving home some point or other and waving her arms around hysterically like Sir Neville Marriner. At what point would it all end between them, he wondered, in the final battle in the Valley of Jehosephat (Joel 3) with him weeping in despair and Laura on top of a rock screaming out at the black universe in a mad squillo until her throat burst its vessels? Or in sordid squalor like that spectacular megalomaniac Charles the Bold, the subject of a bedtime story he had told her that very week, complete with war-cries and calls to arms, who, after trying to create a kingdom of the sprawling realm of Burgundy, was found naked on the battlefield with his face frozen into a pool of blood?

Friction is caused mainly by unevenness in surfaces that touch each other. The smoother these surfaces, the less the friction. Oddly enough, friction between unlike materials is less than that between substances of the same kind, which then posed something of a problem for Eu-

gene who, as they rode, when they rested, after they resumed—rolling friction, sliding friction, riding friction, strolling friction—wondered whether they had *anything* at all in common.

But no argument lasted forever. Whenever he went to kiss her goodnight contritely or tried bussing her in an attempt at loyalty, her kisses gave a lingering taste of peat. "I can't help it," she would say whenever he flinched. "Half the motels we've been stopping at have rotting clapboard bathrooms and that lye soap or borax or whatever the hell they make it from. I mean, is it made from horse-guts or what? I've always had bad breath. It's part of my metabolism. My boyfriend in Queens, that redheaded guy I told you about? Red Cross? He used to say the same thing, OK? But you believe, what, that by sniffing each other, we—"

She was always selling wolf-tickets, spoiling for fights in a way that seemed a need for attention. Wasn't it true, as he told her in his fable, there is something dehumanizing about *any* sort of addiction?

"I've read some of your nutty articles."

"Oh come on," he pleaded, covering his sore eyes and wailing to fate, "W.I.E.B.O.?"

"Meaning?"

Eugene looked at Laura and counted it out on five fingers. "Will. It. Ever. Be. Over."

"Formulas, hypotheses," she muttered, her hands held tightly, her eyes straight ahead, speaking coldly to the front window. "People sniffing each other like dogs."

"Give it a rest."

"No."

Tired of arguing, Eugene made a plea for five minutes silence, his *adhortatio*: "Let's try to care?"

"You don't believe your own theories?"

"Look, I wrote that histocompatibility can trigger love. MHCs kick in. A woman's casual whiff of a man's scarf or shirt may reveal, what, far more about his sexiness than a year of exchanging letters, that's all, OK? Big deal. Women, and I know I've mentioned this to you before, have a superior sense of smell than men. Be flattered. Who knows why? Perhaps it is only another one of those biological gifts women have, part of a natural power to screen suitors, the better to evaluate the worth of a potential mate's merits. All right?"

"Can I drive?" she asked, yawning.

"Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"Take the wheel for a change?"

"No."

"Teach me."

"No," he said, ignoring her to continue talking. "I'm not attacking anybody, do you understand? About scent, I mean. I've accused you of nothing. You needn't shout at me." He knew that she was touchy about genetics, and, God knows, she had a terror of AIDS, but he remembered reading with approval the significant argument put forth by F. Bryant Furlow in *Psychology Today* that scent was not only a significant attractor of mates but a good way to try to determine whether one's partner would be a safe contributor to the health of your offspring, that body scents are aromatic byproducts of the immune system, and that genetic compatibility not only makes a suitor's smell pleasing but that we smell best to a person whose genetically based immunity to disease *differs* most from our own! It was a sort of built-in guarantee to health, to look at it from that perspective. But the subject of whatever highlighted their differences, his and Laura's, he seriously tried to avoid.

"Can I drive?"

Did this person ever listen?

"This is a 3220-pound car, OK? Anything this heavy, traveling even at 20 miles per hour, develops about 45,000 foot pounds of kinetic energy." He breathed a ball of fog onto the driver's window and quickly doodled

$$KE = \tfrac{1}{2}\, MV^2$$
$$KE = \tfrac{1}{2}\, 3220 \times (30 \times 30) = 45{,}000$$
$$32.2$$

"That is enough energy to lift a 1000-pound elevator about three stories, Laura. Picture it crashing. I want to live."

"You're half blind!"

He slammed the wheel.

"Tell you what."

"What?"

"Take a trip east of Boston!"

" Why don't *you* take one—*west of L.A.*!"

Eugene knew that freak-speed anger of hers and the zippidydoodah

alacrity of its delivery, always fraught with accusation and contempt. Harriet Trombone was a very sweet grape, rich in tartaric acid, like a Welsch Riesling, and Rapunzel, smooth harmony, aroma emerging lemony and slightly candied with a hint of hazel-nut, a long, subtle symphony that converted in his mind to the taste of good champagne. Laura was a sour wine, botryisized grapes!

"Let's not argue," he said. Being with her was like going to the moon; once you got past the atmosphere, it was all a question of steering, he felt, as slowly he came to realize with more force than ever that this long journey of his life, in what of its—his—refusals he could no longer avoid recognizing, was actually a reverse *cri de foi*, a situation where he was in fact fleeing his own lack of belief, not to a new faith, rather to the misery of *reason*.

There was an argument of theirs in an old cemetery—he had been trying to locate the place where someone had told him the enigmatic B. Traven was buried—and she was impatient to move on, sulking and frowning and trailing behind him like a mutinous Sherpa. They earlier stopped for lunch, and with all her complaining, the hamburger he had eaten had turned into a bicycle in his stomach. "I wanna go to Las Vegas," whined Laura. "*Delassata*," he read aloud, tracing the word on a gravestone. "Meaning?" she snappishly asked from behind him, shifting her feet. He made no reply. "*Meaning?*" she bellowed. He turned around and shouted, "Weary! *Exhausted!* OUTWORN!" He wanted to shoot her. His eyes hurt, and lately an ache from the war wound in his thigh had begun to exert itself. A hot silence followed. Look at me. *Video meliora probaque; deteriora sequor*. I see what I ought to do, but continue to do what I know I oughtn't.

The biography of every human. "My Soul, there is a countrie / Far beyond the stars. . . ." Vaughan, he thought. Von—*from*. From? Nowhere.

The very worst fight they had was at a brief stop in the town of Markleeville, California, a bench-clearing brawl in a noisy white-tiled café under the slowly turning lollipop of a huge pectin sign above a Shell gas station when, because he did not introduce her to a beautiful young woman by the name of Lynne Moore whom he had known in Boston and whom they happened to bump into among a group in a church buscapade when, since nothing more immediate came to mind upon seeing her, Eugene kissed her on the cheek and exclaimed how fit, tanned, and lovely she looked. "You fabrikoid!" said Laura. It

was her favorite insult. "Fabrikoid! Fabrikoid! Fabrikoid!" Laura, born jealous but suddenly mindful of Eugene's long-ago girlfriend Snow, and any number of other women, found his behavior inexcusable and later slapped him in the face, knocking his glasses off. "Buy a goddamn telescope! Buy a goddamn telescope!" she kept screaming at the top of her lungs, as the thin high-pitched sound scratched his face. Two awful hours of rasping vituperation followed. *Remind me who I am,* thought Eugene. At the motel, after Laura had withdrawn to a far corner and with enough hierophantic gestures of revenge to be certain he would notice, she recorded the scene into her notebook, word for word, slap for insult, and then lay awake far into the night, her wide ears purplish red, her big hair against the pillow, her long nose pointed to the ceiling, her handkerchief knotted into a wet rag, sobbing with her neurotic complicated, childish grief until at last she went to sleep.

She allowed herself to be coaxed out of her mood but managed to retain a slight air of injury when they resumed talking and walking through a part of Yosemite where the big black clunky shoes she always wore, and which he referred to as her "lesbian punters," were as usual completely wrong for the terrain. She hated walking. "Didn't Werner Herzog say, 'Walking is virtue, tourism deadly sin'?"

Her blank, uncomprehending stare irritated him so much he wanted to shove her off a butte. Nothing, he decided, would make him talk to her, but our resolves invariably become broken in times of duress.

"You chew gum like Norman Bates."

"He chewed gum?"

"*Chawnked* it," snapped Eugene who, in a bad mood, had his back to her and was fiddling under the hood of the car. It so happened that during one of Laura's frequent "I-need-a-coffee" stops at a convenience store somewhere down near Kings Canyon, at dawn, before using a bathroom there, he had asked Laura to put some bottles of water in the trunk, which she did but then managed to lose the car keys.

"Lost the goddamn *car keys*, for godsakes?" asked Eugene, looking severe.

"Right." No remorse.

"Where?"

Laura's eyes darted and shifted, as if she were simultaneously solving a math problem, puzzling out an unknown face, and working up an excuse. He lifted out cushions, flung aside books and clothes, and kicked the fireless and vacant car that sat there in a bleak xeriscape of

bitter roots and old thirsty plants and mad drought. Was this feeble act of hers, this bald and meaningless felony, an act of spite done in retaliation for not letting her drive?

"I asked you where."

She turned away. "Where I was sitting, I guess."

"Doing what?"

"Nodding off."

"Nodding off?"

"Daydreaming. How do I know?"

I couldn't help it, said Stan to Ollie in *Oliver the Eighth*, thought Eugene. *I was dreaming I was awake and then I woke up and found myself asleep.*

They walked around, got on their hands and knees, stood up, sighed, and moved in circles looking through sand for the keys for more than an hour, all to no avail, and so Eugene tried to hot-wire the car, running a wire from the positive side of the battery to the red coil wire and putting a screwdriver, crossing the two, on the battery cable and the solenoid switch. The engine suddenly burped, pop-popped, cranked, and then turned over. When they were on their way, Laura, who after saying nothing for three or four interminable miles of staring straight ahead with a dark, sulcus line drawn down between her scowling eyes like a pointed pout, suddenly turned to him to ask ringingly, "What are you staring at? I suppose you want to kill me." It was right at that point that Eugene saw a car with a bumper-sticker: "It's Time to Pull Over and Change the Air in Your Head."

They couldn't have been more different. She loved caper films, he liked musicals. He liked yeast donuts, she liked cake donuts. Her flat was barren, his rooms, with an excess of books, were improbably information-dense like the interior of his own skull. He put toilet paper in this way, she put toilet paper in that way. She wanted to hear rock music, he preferred old blues and early jazz records and stylings from the Twenties. She used e-mail, he mailed letters. He drove, she walked. He registered anger by silence; she expressed her fury in the *acuti scuro* of high, dark, ultrasonic screams. He always wore the same jacket and fell asleep early, she was a Midnight Mary and often wore her hair piled up high in a ludicrous vacherin of convenience that, although cooling to her, looked ridiculous. She ridiculed his tropism for order ("I want my headset on, even when I am not listening, OK?" she barked) and his addiction to Good & Plentys, and he deplored her bad manners and corrected her mispronunciations. ("Freixenet—when

you ordered that cheap and awful and headachy sparkling wine?—is, don't be offended, pronounced fresh-uh-nut.") He was indifferent to swimming pools; she insisted each motel they stopped at have one, although, spastically flopping about, gulping throatfuls of water—forget jackknifes, half-gainers, gaudy acrobatics—she almost drowned every time she dipped. ("OK, fimp, out of the drain!" the motel manager in Bullhead City, Arizona, shouted to her at the pool's edge when he though she was too inexpert to be at the deep end.) She was replete with endless, tiresome boyfriend tales, while he bored her rigid with plots and stories from old radio programs, quoting verbatim dialogues from *Henry Aldrich* and bits between W. C. Fields and Charlie McCarthy, and more often than she could bear a spirited rendering in full of the Lone Ranger introduction:

"With his faithful Indian companion Tonto, the daring and resourceful Masked Rider of the Plains led the fight for law and order in the early western United States. Nowhere in the pages of history can one find a greater champion of justice. Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear! From out of the past come the thundering hoofbeats of the great horse, Silvaair! The Lone Ranger rides again!"

She hated his revociferating urges for her to do something with her life, he could not stand her inappropriate laughter. She was earnest, he was ironic. He was intense, she was casual. He listened, she rarely heard. She wanted to go out on New Year's Eve and blow horns, he chose to stay home and sit before a candle and dream of life on another planet. He liked to read literature, she preferred magazines and articles with titles like "What Your Envy Tells You" and "Make a Date with Yourself" and "Is Date Rape a Late Fate?" and "How Ann Marie Made Her Fat Work for Her" and "Confront Solutions" and "Emotional Must-Haves" and "When Decades Count Does Sex Still Count?" They disagreed about music on the radio. "It's my opinion that that is a silly song," she would say, and he would reply, "And it is my opinion that your opinion that that's a silly song is silly." To him she was thoughtless and inconsiderate. She never wrote to or called her sisters who were in mental institutions. She tended to believe, irrationally, that once a problem was solved for her it had likewise vanished for others. A voluble talker, she did not seem to grasp that conversation had reciprocal rules. A deliberate thinker, he nevertheless tried to welcome what she had to say. To her, he was overly censorious and

repetitive and accusatory and refused to mind his own business. He liked to watch the news and old movies, generally, while she preferred afternoon game shows with overadrenalized audiences that screamed at every fart joke and the morning talk shows, a homogenized effluent of mindless patter and less-than-trivial guests and features for both stultified housewives in midlife crises and sad, overweight homebodies locked into dull, repetitive lifestyles the day they left high school. Still, for all that tension they were yoked, conjoined, a co-dominant trunk on a tree. He decided that because he said *she* shopped too much that to be fair he would no longer look for old records on their trip, which was not only pointless but depressingly reminded him of Little Bob Merkle and despicable little magpies like him—used-book dealers for the most part, common trash, the equivalent of dump-pickers in the Third World, although they were far less honest and nowhere as needy, who picked up books for fifty cents each at used-book sales and then turned around and sold them for twenty times that or more. It never seemed to matter what resolutions Eyestones made to change about himself or what revisions Laura Warholic made regarding her own life, however. It seemed even their shadows never touched. The two were at complete loggerheads. The rest was all rote and cant and stale obligation.

Laura nitpicked over food—"I want *that* brownie, not the one with the edge on it," she'd insist—and was slower than cold lava in every enterprise. Eugene delayed too long in bookstores and listened to "memory" stations on the radio, boring her to tears. She arose late, while he got up early, preventing any synchronicity toward the end of the day. He disliked eating lunch late and then having to sit down to dinner at midnight as they do in Brazil. He told her, "You lollygag." Her retort was, "You don't love me as much as I love you." "Do you believe that?" "Do you doubt that?" "I mean, that you love me?" he would ask with disbelief. There was a long, backlogged agenda of hurts and slights and petty arguments between them. He said that she never listened. She replied that he could not see. "You're mistaken. My eyeglasses are clear as crystal and as tough as airplane glass." "You mean, as thick as bricks." "Why don't you try to save money by avoiding junk food?" "Why don't you go marry a man?" "Who is talking about marriage?" "Why are men impossible to please?" she asked him. He responded by asking, "Why don't women who think men are impossible to please not realize that often men are simply not pleased by them?" She was

slow (she found the car keys in a vest), and he was impatient (he threw the vest out the window). She had a way of biting off her words as if she wished she would get to the point. He asked far too many questions and expected immediate answers. Near Boise, they had a spat, fittingly, about Laura's spinelessness in complaining about her father but refusing to stand up to him. She criticized him for lecturing her and repeating the same stories. He replied that he was sick of her complaints and crabby demurrals. She said she hated Queen Noor. He made her take off a blue sweatshirt saying *FCK — the only thing missing is you*. She nagged that his shoes were bent while he pointed out with growing annoyance that since they had arrived in California she had cultivated the vile habit of queening it at breakfast and insisting on having only heirloom tomatoes, artisan bacon, and signature coffee. She told him that his eyeglasses were out-of-date, and he replied that her pipestem trousers were too short. When he chastised her for beginning every answer of hers with the word *Well*—an irksome but widespread American tic—she mocked him for coming out with ridiculous fuddy-duddyisms as they drove like saying "Thank you, ma'am!" every time they hit a bump in the road and muttering, "And the boy's name is Anthony," every time they reached a destination.

Laura also used Tampax that, while it appeared to have nothing to do with him, it did. "It happens to be a product made by Procter & Gamble. You know that company, right? They are the originators of the sinister concept that brands within the same company should compete against one another as if they were separate companies. No moral consistency—no 'seamless garment.' Totally corrupt! Utterly without ethics!" exclaimed Eugene, who was a committed member of PETA. "You belong to that club?" she asked. "It's not a 'club.' It's an organization," he said, taking out his PETA card. "I'm number 015065153." Laura sardonically perked up. "I'm wicked impressed. What does that make you, a Junior Birdman?" "Not at all." She shrugged. "So?" "They are corrupt." Laura, with half-closed eyes, to make a point, yawned and chewed it. "The Biblical passage that gives human beings dominion over animals," he said, "restricts that dominion against eating them by commanding Adam and Eve to be vegetarians: 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with a seed in it. They will be yours for food.' Genesis 1:29."

"Well, the concept of rights for animals is modern, about two hun-

dred years old," she sneered.

"So is the concept of rights for human beings," he replied. "And you used *well* again."

"Nobody cares about these projects but you."

"Ridiculous."

"True."

"Nonsense on stilts."

"Oh please, don't give me any more of that 'Animals are little people in fur coats' bullshit," she said, "I don't think I can take it."

"Maybe you are unaware of the fact, although I happen to know it's the case, but that company poisons and kills thousands of animals every year in order to test its products, even though, first of all, no law requires such tests be made and, second of all, more than seven hundred other companies in this country test their products without using animals!"

Laura looked up vacantly from a tube of Pringles. "And?"

"You should boycott them. *Procter & Gamble poisons animals!*"

Laura crunched a potato chip.

"No Ivory Soap either. Or Crest toothpaste, for that matter. No Clearasil. Or Prell shampoo. No Hawaiian Punch *or* Pringles Potato Chips. Or Vidal Sassoon anything. No Pampers. No Tide. Speaking of long tentacles, Laura, I thought that anticorporate stance of yours was one of your major boasts? Where are those principles now? Don't you care?"

She snorted. "Not."

"About anything?"

"You mean, other than that everybody born in the month of March should be executed?"

"That being, what, the birth-month of Mickey Warholic?"

She nodded. "And my father's."

"And of course nobody else's."

She said nothing.

"And of course nobody else's," he repeated.

"*Fuck nobody else!*"

XXX
Bored on the Fourth of July

Human beings who live closely or together, Eyestones realized, frequently *do* become a joint product. Isn't a face pointing in another's direction always forged by another's weather? It has been pointed out that if a slave is raised by association with a superior master, by a social alchemy inherent in that union, the master also may be lowered by association and proximity with that inferior slave, while the slave at the same time of course weightlessly graduates out of his or her own servile disesteem. The Assyrian conqueror on the bas-relief, as Herbert Spencer remarked, is himself tied to the rope by which he leads the prisoner. At Jacob's Well in the city of Sychar, Jesus Christ in speaking to the Samaritan woman who had married five husbands (John 4:7-26), while extending to her the salvation of "living water," the water of eternal life, discretely kept a moral and aesthetic distance from that much-married woman, despite the fact that he loved her, as he loves us all, and would die for her sins on Calvary in order to redeem her. It was a meeting that at the same time allowed the Evangelist to observe of the disciples who at dinner-time were just returning for food: "But none said 'Why are you talking to her?'" Isn't the fact of Jesus openly speaking with that woman—and no one remarking on it—the greater miracle by far, a fact more significant than the somewhat crazed foot-clapping exuberance the woman feels running to town to announce through some kind of luck she had just discovered a prophet?

Doesn't ecumenism merely play cards? Isn't there in the nature of leveling the danger of homogenization, Eyestones asked himself, when people pushed to the extreme of interchanging commerce, even if claiming to be lovers and so individualized by gender, can so easily become enantiomorphs like fat Tweedledum and Tweedledee, mirror-image forms of each other? Isn't the act of joining almost by definition a psychotropic act, having more to do with snobbery, exclusivity, and collaborative reinforcement than with sharing? Don't we half the time pathetically join as much to *lose* liberty as to find some kind of unanimity or shared prestige or mutual enlightenment, like some poor feeble blindman groping for a handrail? We thrive, ideally, as individuals, when each individual should come to discover either his merit or his nullity according to—and solely by—his very own lights. It is inevitably our exhaustion, however, that interprets history and rarely our intellect or the informing imperatives of truth, and the continuance of a community and its consistency coincides, horrible to relate, with the continuance and consistency of its prejudices. Partners are neither servants nor slaves. Neither are they rivals. But what are they?

Isn't that nature of union itself dodgy? Joining! Eyestones had always hated camps, groups, armies, roommates, fraternities, men's clubs, associations, marching societies, Knights of Columbus, nightclubs, sodalities, bands, Rotaries, Moose, Elks, mummers, masons, communes, communities, conventions, meetings, assemblies, faculties, unions and confederates, leagues, lodges, you name it, *neighborhoods* even! Who ever accomplished anything in a crowd but the carnival barker? The fan? The conventioneer? The crowd is nothing but a fascist dramaturgy. It is not only the blasphemy of mass response, the wilting mind, the rabid anti-intellectualism, the mad unreason, the capitulating loss of principles, the noise, the flannel-mouthed cant, the adulterated principles, the will to staged publicity, the deference to prevailing thought, the crazed Dionysian inherent in the ecstatic feelings of union—joining itself depressed him! A design is artificially formed in a crowd, in its malignant bulk an attitude assumed, bullets shot from the mouth of its multiple muzzle.

Democracy exacts the fealty of conformity. A mind forsaken! The "tyranny of the majority" threatened the young republic, wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*, adding, "I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America. . . . It is easier to establish an absolute and

despotic government in a people where conditions are 'equal' than in any other." No wonder that H. L. Mencken defined democracy as "the art of running the circus from the monkey cage."

The democratic idea is a riddling concept that the Puritans not so much eschewed as loathed. It is hard to believe how what to us as a form of government represents such a stabilizing and indeed sacred ideal was so readily oppugned by most of our far-seeing and bravest forefathers. "Democracy, I do not conceive that even God did ordeyne as a fitt government eyther for church or commonwealth," wrote the nonconformist Reverend John Cotton, who at twenty-seven was made vicar of the notable parish of Saint Botolph's in Boston, Lancashire and was later recognized head of the Puritan Congregational church that was governed by its parishioners and ruled by no hierarchy of king, pope, cardinal, archbishop, deacon, or priest. John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, unequivocally waved away democracy declaring that it is "accounted the very meanest and worst of all forms of government," and in the wake of that pronouncement, intolerant of dissent, he proceeded to boot out Roger Williams in 1636 and then Anne Hutchinson two years later, a policy framing an attitude that would find its living counterpart a few centuries later in aristocrat Henry Adams's stiff lament, *Democracy: An American Novel*, his portrait of an upside-down world seized by poltroons, sharpsters, hypocrites, and rogues.

Who ever expects anyone to believe that democracy, which in its predominating sense is rule by the majority, is ever anything more than a cheap and bogus version or variation of rat-faced populism? What makes a majority right? Is a majority right merely for having been duly elected? Exactly what is its virtue? Balance? Common sense? Proof against radical agitation? Or is it more often than not in practice a descent into hideous sameness, national stupidity, a general pledge from, as well as an appeal to, the lowest possible tastes—greedy, materialistic, loud—and to the uncouth masses? The People! *Il Populo!* "Reptiles," in the dismissive and excoriating words of Gouverneur Morris, one of the principal architects of the Constitution. Stampeding ungulates with their flocking behavior! Idiotic folk with their shoaling reactions! Churls of groupthink! A country of dunces! Sheep! The revolutionary radical Tom Paine, the son of a Quaker artisan who as a boy grew up next to a gallows, as the author of the inflammatory, break-down-the-ramparts *Common Sense*—of which the London *Times* in 1792 icily

observed, "It is earnestly recommended to Mad Tom that he should embark for France and there be naturalized into the regular confusion of democracy"—would have thrown open the portals of anarchy to anyone or anything governed, except the poor wives that he as an angry and mean-spirited drunk regularly beat like a drum. If such are the governed, what of the governors? "Secrecy on the part of rulers makes democracy impossible," critic Garry Wills wisely points out, pondering the fallout of all the dunderheaded excesses of all those fools in Washington—cruel and unprovoked wars based on lies, closed session raises in salary, lobbyist's graft and grease-gifts, endless pork-barrel legislation, PAC money pocketed, swag from thieving taxes, endless pursuit of profit, and so forth. "Since democracy depends on the government's accountability to the people," notes Wills, "the people cannot hold their rulers to account if they do not know what they are doing."

If the Constitution was not a gamble, it was then a gamut run by hopefuls. The continuing question remains, what that is ratified by common law may not be reversed by natural law? Thomas Wait of Maine, only one of a thousand anti-Federalists who denied that the vast continent of America could be ruled on the principles of freedom, unequivocally declared, "You might as well try to rule hell by prayer."

Was that not why James Madison, who believed that "direct democracy" was an invitation to disaster, insisted during that historic summer of 1787 that the Constitution being drawn up should embody "the policy of refining the popular appointments by successive filtrations"? Was that not why he desperately warned his colleagues of the perils of democracy? Was that not why one of the framers of the Constitution questioned the leaders gathered there as to what would happen in England "if elections were open to all classes of people?" Why he sought desperately "to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority?" Why he yearned for limited democracy for *free* men alone? Why Alexis de Tocqueville mistrusted plebiscitary democracy, who noticed all around him in the young America of 1831 a native suspicion of the new and the original, an unsettling leveling tendency, a country-wide anti-intellectualism, and a hostility to spoken truth as well? It was nothing less than a scandal to the young Frenchman to witness how "the majority erects a formidable barrier around thought." "Woe unto him who dares to venture beyond those limits," he warned. "He must face all sorts of unpleasantness and daily persecution."

Bizarrely, the idea of *too* much democracy in the states motivated

some of the framers to question the nature of it. The concept of final legal sovereignty being placed in the hands of the people instead of being granted to federal or state governments frightened many of them. What kind of quiddity gave a mob a voice? What sort of entity, they wondered, is a "sovereign" people? How in heaven could anything like a democracy exclude certain people and not therefore be denominated tyranny? So they wrung the neck of truth and called it logic. Better, chop-logic! Many of the clauses of the Constitution not only easily accommodated but strengthened slavery, particularly the clause that apportioned the direct taxes and representation of the states in the House by creatively counting slaves as three-fifths of free persons. (Article IV, in fact, obliged free states to send any and all fugitive slaves back to slavery!) The gruesome, undermining fact that in a democracy slaves existed, never mind that slaves could not vote, was not even the half of it. Neither could white women, children, nor in most states in the year 1787 all propertyless men, although all of them were still counted in determining the size of each state's representation. Credibility follows cash, face it. The country's very first president, George Washington, an eighteenth-century colonial aristocrat, was heir to a fortune built on slave labor.

American democracy, which is a half-aristocratic/half-popular charter of republicanism, is in fact also a paradox. Is not the term "ordered liberty," in fact, an oxymoron? There is less kinship than antagonism between stability and progress, and in the strange and irreconcilable tension faced by the framers in trying to forge a democratic constitution upon both resides the burden the country faces today. In Emerson's words, "Each a good half but an impossible whole." It is all of it a dilemma rich in possibilities, also in contradictions.

Does wisdom accumulate? Who dares say so? Public opinion? By that do we mean gossip, the uninformed blather of any passing yahoo, the crass, widely available commerce of any dunce's dumb hunches, any dopes's goggling guesses? Shall what holds sway be what any fool asserts? Should opinions then be followed because many—*most*—are ignorant? But are we not free, theologically speaking, only to do *right*? Is it not arguable that in such a benighted world any true leadership will be suffocated by any asphyxiating impulse? Self-reliance in any temporal venture in a government where crowd mentality takes over can only disappear into a herd. Isn't that why Disraeli used the word *democratic* as a scare word? Doesn't such a society begin to die from the

head downward? Won't bureaucracies, the buboes of populist thinking, flourish, assholes with no term-limits hold sway, and a reconquest of the darkness be our fate, a patrimony of dissolution and anemia? Sloth will arise all around, it was feared. We will be liberated from the grace of custom. A coarsening of once-civilized life shall then be felt. The cosmos will be wounded by what, being ignored, will then prevail, with the inevitable being asked, *When doesn't more mean worse?*

Where did we get this bold and implacable idea, so ardent, so crucial, so desperately aligned to our full sense of national identity—indeed, our justification of it—that none of us are as good as all of us? What private or personal failing did it solve in each of those who embraced that dynamic? May it be asked what arousal template was involved? Crowd comfort? Self-sabotage? Fear of diversity? A beast frolic? How and when and why did we conclude that ethics are incompatible with individuality? From diffidence? Distrust of oligarchy? Experience? Tradition, which G. K. Chesterton defined as "the democracy of the dead"?

The Founding Fathers in establishing the new nation never envisioned a democracy. It may be argued that no committee in history more greatly feared license than that group of statesmen gathered in Independence Hall in Philadelphia in 1776. What they advanced was a union, speaking and writing for the relatively few people at the time who were able to vote. Their failure to deal with slavery, their lack of foresight to specify whether sovereignty lay with the states or the nation, may simply be referred to their underlying mistrust of a general populace they cared not a whit to placate. Not once does the United States Constitution officially either declare or denominate the young and burgeoning nation it spoke for a "republic." Neither does that singular document nor the Declaration of Independence contain the broad and universally egalitarian statement, "All men are born free and equal." The word *democracy* never *once* appears in the Constitution nor in the Declaration of Independence or in any of the first state constitutions drawn up in those early years.

Thucydides did not approve of the concept of democracy and described it as arbitrarily "committing the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude." Socrates was no more democrat than aristocrat. As a form of government, democracy was rated by Plato below oligarchy and only second-worst to tyranny. Aristotle refused to accept democracy. Curiously, democracy in Greece was a brief, historical epi-

sode that had little direct influence on either the theory or practice of what we know in our modern democratic states. Athens, that vaunted "cradle of democracy," had never experienced a jot of federal government but simply followed either the law of the city-state or the force of conquerors. It may be mentioned here by way of gloss that the concept of marriage as a partnership between a man and a woman was for all purposes almost entirely foreign to the Greek mind.

What constitutes equality that cannot also cripple it—and, paradoxically, by the very same measures, the very same methods? Eyestones remembered what Ralph Waldo Emerson, who surely must have seen the cost of consensus, memorably stated: "Men descend to meet." Does this not cap the concept of capture? Imprison those who would rise? Even allow for true bonding? "Those who attempt to level never equalize," wrote Edmund Burke who, in spite of his compassionate sympathies, not only at bottom suspected the art and science of government but harbored a low opinion of the political capacity of the masses, and as a matter of fact he quite publicly and poignantly rejected all proposals for altering parliamentary representation or enlarging suffrage on democratic principles. Face it, there is frankly not now and never has been true equality regarding men, nothing close to it. It was specifically because that insightful protector Mr. John Adams perspicaciously believed that men were *not* equal, not even close to being equal, and alas never would be, that he believed all men should therefore be *equal before the law*, an idea for which the man became an insistent, zealous, and uncompromising advocate. Was it not revealing that Thomas Jefferson, perhaps our greatest president, never once publicly referred to himself as a *democrat* or in fact ever used the term in any of his public addresses? A simple majority, he knew, could be as completely and fully despotic as any one-man rule could ever be. The Great Virginian did not trust and never trusted "the mobs of the great cities," as he passionately put it, nor in fact the loose, unpredictable, roiling and dangerous proletariat that he saw all about him in the very young and still backward country over which he presided in its highest office. Our forefathers were far from egalitarian in their outlook. They believed in government *of* the people and *for* the people, but not *by* the people, not even close. In their wisdom, they were too dedicated to the principle, the idea, of individual liberty and freedom ever to equate such concepts with the extremes of equality and democracy. Only during Andrew Jackson's time did the novel idea of "King Num-

bers" predominate—majority rule—when on the memorable day of his inauguration vulgar, pixilated mobs of shoeless, inbred, illiterate, road-kill-eating hijacks and rubes in yellow galluses and sharp-elbowed busybodies in gingham pushed and shoved and kicked their way into the rooms of the White House, knocking over punch bowls, smashing glasses, and trailing their muddy boots all over the rugs.

Place-settings, everybody! Enter the vulgarians! They convene to legislate like a surge of insane cooks using fennel, tearing off the hair and ripping out the heart. Debates never end. Debate in a democracy is interminable. Mr. and Mrs. Dumbo have to have their say. It is Quackville, pure and simple. "The chair recognizes the man in the paper hat!" Consensus—always compromise—is king. And compromise, the married couple's stalemate, the bane of right reason, is always the enemy of daring, originality, invention, spareness, insight, and decision."That is the trouble with homogenization," said Robert Frost. "No cream can go to the top."

Is it any wonder why so many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers—thinkers like Hobbes, Mandeville, and Burke—feared the bombinating barbarisms of democratic America? Bleats from the choiring troughs of selectmen? Greedy squeals from dwarf mayors for allocations? The blather of plug-uglies who with grating *arrivisme* seek to hog the perks of elective office? Must not pluralism in all of its incorporative extremes always approach the appalling taste, leveling consensus, and utter mindlessness of a common vision? What else can explain the crumminess of talk-shows? Why else has radio become a bullhorn for vulgar shills and television nothing but a seedy, despicable marketing box? Nothing makes the depravity of shabby taste ever ashamed of itself once its imperfections become the norm.

It was with this hollow and diluted feeling that Eyestones, coming to realize that Laura Warholic only doubled his problems instead of halving them and filled with an endless spate of questions and reservations that appeared to have no logical answers, linked this leveling to his own misguided idea of trying to foster in her essentially similar views and a shared vision. Was the democratic urge anything but a sop to a loud and mischievous pandemonium? An incitement to indocility? A floor-plan for seeing the medicine of any couple, family, state, or nation corrupted? Was there not a demand for unanimity latent in democracy? And in unanimity, to a large degree, the same dull stupid predominating match-of-average falsely held up as the ideal,

even while it is being corroded from within by separate faction, opposing ambition, natural hostility, secret detente, the envy of power, and, above all, a glaring lack of common memory of affection? Didn't the democratic mind believe that mankind could not develop its vital liberty without also coming to a unanimous vision of the world? Who ever claimed that liberty was equality? When everyone is part of a government, do not its aims by very definition become more plebeian? Aristotle acutely observed that a democracy has many striking points with a tyranny. Edmund Burke, who in his day never saw—or, for that matter, personally even knew of—a modern example of democracy in a great country, understood that in antiquity democracy had tended toward demagoguery and sagaciously foresaw that rule by the people would end up, as it did in France, a Jacobin-run, rabble-wild, topsy-turvification of chaos and imbecility, a totalitarian state of despotism ruling over an equality in servitude! Thomas Carlyle who saw in democracy the despair of anyone being able to find any heroes to govern well warned us that the demagogue is the natural product of a democratic institution, corrupt midgets with bulging pockets and blarney weak in the faith of God, strong only in the faith that paragraphs and plausibilities bring votes. Was this, he asked, the projected ideal of our forefathers? An ant-swarm inanity? A culture forged from the ordinary world of the boarding house? Laws passed by and for every jumped-up jasper and joey pinocchio? An odd-come-short world run by faux patriots and flatulent phonies on state pensions, the common brood of rebels and offspring of liars burning with lust among the oaks and under every spreading tree? This was the upshot of freedom, to be able to crow on the night of some rigged and ridiculous election, "Hooray for me, I have finally earned my 380 millionth part as a talker in the National Palaver"?

Strictly speaking, how in truth is a population a government? When Tocqueville thoroughly rejected the American equation of equality with freedom and of democracy with liberty, he had first noticed how men often took the line of least resistance. A born aristocrat who came to this land from France to inspect our prison regime—he stayed only nine months, from May 11, 1831, to February 20, 1832—he became convinced more or less that open societies are always built on a skeptical faith rather than a vigorous confidence, and, while seemingly an obvious recruit for liberalism (he had married an Englishwoman of ordinary origin) he soon suspected that democracy was little more than

economic one-upmanship, a crippling system in which the poor are killed by competition and driven under by the cruel and immutable laws of capitalism. John Jacob Astor, whose father was nothing but a butcher in Waldorf, Germany where he changed his name from Astorga—they were originally Spanish—emigrated to America, fluked the Indians of furs that had profitlessly piled up during the War of Independence, bought land and eventually ruled a dynasty in New York. Native nobility, you ask? Talk to me about the Lakota Sioux and the Blackfeet and the Nez Percé Indians. The Astors were skinning skunks for pelts while the Vanderbilts worked ferries. Lower than tradesmen—nonentities, navvies, nobodies. We delve to be dukes not democrats. It is survival of the fittest where the fit then conquer and kill. Tocqueville saw in its excesses that in a democracy "the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppression upon the minority . . . [worse] than can almost even be apprehended from the dominion of a single scepter." Toward the end of his life, he himself, unfortunately, even came to celebrate his very own country's brutal conquest of Algeria, as if dominance in society was by the law of nature inevitable. Witnessing over a period of time that citizens as if by a natural and perhaps just turpitude following some horrendous neutralizing inevitability of fate began to take more pride, not in personal liberty or freedom or individuality, but in sameness, subordinating their initial concern for freedom of the individual to their new respect for, and fear of, the majority, he significantly wrote, "Every citizen, being assimilated to all the rest, is lost in the crowd, and nothing stands conspicuous but the great and imposing image of the people at large."

In contrast to the marked individualism of early eighteenth-century America, Tocqueville was heartily shocked and dismayed to see uniformity, conformity, and a drab kind of sameness begin to take over and shape the growing ideas of democracy. Whereas our pioneer folk originally sought freedom from the forced inequality of monarchs and aristocrats, slowly, subtly, as conditions became equal among men, individuals became less and less important to them. Sameness soon began to prevail over differences. Rule by the common mind. Dominance by mediocrity. Majority rules. American citizens on a wave of predictable leveling, often a pure warfare of grudge-holding and class contempt, soon became intolerant of the very freedom to be different, in the same propagandistic way that such a brave and innovative

thinker as Ralph Waldo Emerson of Concord, Massachusetts, a fierce intellectual revolutionary, has been co-opted by reactionaries and revisionists who now vapidly point to his famous portrait zooified on the walls of school classrooms today as a beacon of bland conformity and mealy responsibility, a sop to an authority he never questioned.

Was that ever comprehended in Sir Edward Coke's "Petition of Right"?

"Freedom is for those who are fit for it. The rest will lose it or turn it to corruption," wrote historian Francis Parkman in his *Old Regime*. "Promiscuous suffrage is the deepest source of our present political evils." A republic was to Parkman far from the summit of political wisdom or in fact anything like a template for perfect government, and when he surveyed young America in his wide-flung and intrepid travels across the country he could only ask,

> Shall we look for an ideal society in that which tends to a barren average and a weary uniformity, treats men like cattle, counts them by the head, and gives them a vote apiece without asking whether or not they have the sense to use it; or in that which recognizes the inherent differences between man and man? (*Failure of Universal Suffrage*)

Who would deny that similarity of thought is not social contagion? Isn't a great danger of consensus that it is quietly accepted as divine law? And how could a populace in the face of such assumptions fail to see the possibility of a trumpeting state no less blighting to the world than that imposed by, say, a crazed and egotistical dictator or a megalomaniacal emperor or even a theocracy run by an oligarchic handful of reactionary priests? Who exactly *are* the people? That expression! Is it not the rabble? The ranters? The hoi polloi? When has it ever been anything but a now banded, now disbanded posse of deserters and vagabonds? An anagram of *democratic* is "comic trade"! Eyestones well knew from sad experience what the promise of unified wills wrought in those who, even if only two, gathered to celebrate the adventure of common thought. The people! The people are a *party* and in a democracy form not a population but a government that can be as fist-faced and as arbitrary and as cruel as Richard the Third's, and yet to anyone who dares to look closely at it, the word essentially retains a rhetorical and political quality that limits it to one class of the total population, in short, to the people in power! The imposing official title of the great ancient Roman republic, *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, for all of its

broadcasting fustian and bravado, explicitly distinguished the so-called people from the patricians and original landed families and quite studiously ignored the slaves, Nubians, and aliens who for most of the years of the reigning republic significantly outnumbered the plebeian citizens themselves. What of *their* representation? Hegemony can be a hoax. We remember the Holocaust for the terrible slaughter by the Third Reich of millions of Jews, who have nevertheless appropriated the exclusive headline in spite of the glaring and indisputable fact that most of the victims of the Nazi Final Solution, seven million souls taken altogether, were Communists, homosexuals, socialists, pacifists, democrats, plain beggars, Soviet POWs—more than 3.3 million of them!—Roman Catholics, three million non-Jewish Poles, alcoholics, the retarded and feeble-minded—marked with *Blöd* which means "stupid"—mere drifters, priests and ministers, over 500,000 Sinti and Roma Gypsies, prostitutes, Jehovah's Witnesses, vagabonds and vagrants, black people, the recalcitrant or work-shy (*arbeitscheu*), even the eccentric and the ineradicably odd, anyone who did not fit into the so-called people's community or *Volksgemeinschaft*. All those poor, wasted souls who have been further marginalized and blasphemed in being forgotten are almost never memorialized. Was it one of the contemptible racists Joseph Goebbels or Julius Streicher or Adolf Hitler who said, "I do *not* admit that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America, or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher race, or a more worldly-wise race, to put it that way, has come in and taken their place"? No, it was uttered by none other than Sir Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Britain, who had not a jot of sympathy for the Palestinian Arabs when they were displaced in 1948.

History is written by the winners, who in their singular usurpation compound a crime, committing the further atrocity of repressing facts which in a very real way not only re-enacts but hideously travesties not only reality but the essence of truth itself. How ironic was it that Discknickers for all his personal unworthiness and invincible cruelty proved in the end to be correct in pointing out that the very first Zionists to settle in Palestine—the actual pioneers or *chalutzim*—were in fact American Protestants who in planting successive if ill-fated colonies in that land sincerely aimed at "restoring" the Holy Land to the Jews so that their subsequent conversion to Christianity would speed the

Second Coming of Christ!

America stole a quarter of its land from Mexico, passed a Chinese Exclusion Act, wantonly exterminated the native population, confiscated its land, then humiliatingly rounded up and impounded the one percent who were left and penned them up on bleak and remote reservations in some of the most desolate places imaginable, all the while preventing the entire black population—four million Africans in chains ruled by 375,000 slave-owners—from anything like an education for four hundred years. What of their representation? Any of them? The New England pilgrims, forming their social pact out of religious and moral idiosyncrasy, crankily welcomed no strangers as a matter of fact and, regarding democracy, were even more sharply opposed to the idea than mankind in general. The monks of La Trappe live in perfect mystical equality but are cloistered, eat black radishes, exclude women from their company, sleep on boards, rise at 2 A.M., and live according to the stringent medieval Rule of Saint Benedict under the aegis of a liturgically chosen abbot. What is being said in limited liberty? Is not restricted democracy as hopelessly paradoxical as military intelligence and as as farcical as flexodoxy?

Liberty in America, as conceived by the Founding Fathers, had nothing to do with equality. Burke, who feared that "the love, and even the very idea, of genuine liberty was rare," wrote that "of all the loose terms in the world, liberty is the most indefinite." He believed in freedom. "But in liberty without wisdom and without virtue?" he asked. "It is the greatest of all possible evils," he declared, announcing "it is folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint." Men of intemperate minds, he convinced Eyestones, could never be free, for was there ever a desire or a drive or a disposition in man to put moral chains on his appetites? "Our passions forge our fetters," declared Burke. "The effect of liberty to individuals is that they may do what they please; we ought to see what it will please them to do," he pessimistically added, "before we risk congratulations which may be soon turned into complaints." Seeing liberty slubbered, he wrote, "Those who know what virtuous liberty is cannot bear to see it disgraced by incapable heads, on account of their having high-sounding words in their mouths." What do sober men prefer to see in its stead? The Founding Fathers wisely saw that boundaries were necessary. It was with them as with the act of corralling horses: it is the fence that allows for the democratic geometry, its palings the law that, penning in

disparate creatures, shaped the sharing the nature abhorred.

It was also the lament of Mrs. Frances Trollope, who in her critical *Domestic Manners of the Americans* was very hard on the lower-classes after her failed experience in opening a bazaar in muddy, semibackward, hog-killing Cincinnati in the 1830s. A visiting Englishwoman, she believed rightly or wrongly that the rude young country in which she soon found herself so unhappy could never achieve anything like an acceptable state of civilization until all the oafs and citizens of the lower orders gave up a good deal of their country familiarity and openly crude and vulgarly boastful independence for the more proper attitude of servility and respect toward their betters. It was her belief that the native Indians were more civilized than the loud, sharp-elbowed, gross-booted, be-hatted republicans who, having stolen their land, arrogantly presumed to replace them by presuming that whatever crackpot set of laws and statutes jerry-rigged in Washington DC to hold them were sacrosanct.

American hero Charles A. Lindbergh believed that democracy was a failure, a mode of government "decadent" and "in moral decay." So did his wife, Anne Morrow, who in her strange, dark, semi-fascistic book *The Wave of the Future* never once used the word *democracy* without skeptical quotation marks, and almost on the brink of passive despair wrote, "I do not believe we need to be defeated against a mechanized German army invading our shores as much as against the type of decay, weakness, and blindness into which all the 'Democracies' have fallen since the last war." Was it the case that Lindbergh, who flew, saw us from above as hordes? Mistrusted the many as opposed to the one? Did he see rabid crowds too often out of control to conclude anything but that democracy is an utter disaster? Was not that the fear in the American experiment of James Fenimore Cooper in *The Pioneers*? Had not Lindbergh seen enough of the uncontrolled mobs tearing at his clothes at Le Bourget Airport or fistfighting over his aviator's cap or howling for his autograph everywhere he went? Of hustlers and shills selling cheap morbid trinkets like tiny wooden ladders at the New Jersey courthouse after his baby had been kidnapped? Of jackals like the morbid, exploitative photographers breaking into the morgue to take pictures of the half-eaten remains of his slain son, which with shrieks they hawked in the streets of Trenton for five bucks apiece? Had he not had his fill of the shouting populace, or being nagged by crass reporters, of being vilified for his "America First" beliefs?

"The tyranny of the herd," Lord Bertrand Russell called it, blaming America for its pusillanimous conformism and pointing out, "Eccentricity is frowned upon and unusual opinions bring social penalties upon those who hold them. . . . It is, I think, the worst feature of America." He wrote,

> Democratic education unadulterated has evils which are as great as those of aristocracy, if not greater. Democracy as a sentiment has two sides. When it says, "I am as good as you," it is wholesome, but when it says, "You are no better than I am," it becomes oppressive and an obstacle to the development of exceptional merit . . . it inspires persecution of exceptional individuals by the herd.

Was that why Russell cynically declared that, no matter how you small it down, what ultimately constitutes a nation is merely a sentiment and an instinct, a sentiment of similarity and an instinct of belonging to the same group or herd? When architect Frank Lloyd Wright complained that he was persecuted in America because of the "deadly sin in democracy of having ideas," where was the compliment? Why did Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy write on the eve of World War II, "The democracies are finished"—because he had hope for this country?

"The true theater of a demagogue is a democracy," wrote James Fenimore Cooper in *The American Democrat.* When public opinion is widely sought, any intemperate, domineering architect of class and savagery—McCarthy, Nixon, the scheming Bushes—fills the refluxing stomach and no end of evil prevails in a vomit of aggressive unreason and unlaw. The people as a body is often a dunce without a hat, staring into space. We who live in democracies are almost always pulled powerlessly in the direction of the big dumb dopey herd! Weevils on the march!

"The first Lord Rothschild is reported to have said that it is a mistake to neglect the farthings: the wisdom of the man of finance is certainly greater here than the wisdom of the man of law, with his principle *de minimus non curat lex*. This legal maxim is fundamentally wrong, " warned Malcolm Burr in *The Insect Legion*, "because the cumulative effect of the minute in mass always overcomes the massive in unity. Micro-organisms—ferments—bacteria—and tiny insects—whose very existence is so often ignored—have enormous power for good or for evil. The tiny contribute by totality to tear down. Insects through-

out history have brought down empires, decimated armies, wiped out generations, sapped civilizations, created plagues, sickened whole continents, and, points out Burr, "contributed more than any other single factor to the growth of the organizations for nursing the sick."

Look to the insect legion.

Ibsen was right, thought Eyestones. The majority is always wrong.

Were we ever a direct democracy? The United States was formed as a republic, or representative democracy. Initially, to cite one instance, the election of the Senate was the province of state legislation, not the people directly. With an increasing latitudinarianism, we have hobbled forward. A tilt toward a wider, more embrasive, and yet incongruent, democracy—against the spirit, if no longer the letter, of the Constitution—has slowly been effected. The Founding Fathers who held in suspicion the transient fervor of crowds never viewed the people as a yardstick of merit or barometer of value or an index of anything worthwhile, whether of progress or profit or principle. Was that why English prime minister Margaret Thatcher hundreds of years later once irritatedly proclaimed, "Consensus is the absence of leadership"?

A case can be made that democracy and equality can make it impossible for one particular man or woman to oppress the many. At the same time, reminding one of those maddeningly confounding prophecies of the ancient Sybil, both in turn make it *equally* impossible for any one man to be free from the tyrannous oppression of the many. Speaking of that particular Scylla and Charybdis, Abraham Lincoln gave us an idea of democracy that, if simple, was also surely simpleminded: "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master"—a false alternative in that ultimately we all take time being both. Would it not better be to ask: Who when he is part of the many being evil is better than a single tyrant being good?

Do we not by definition automatically descend as inordinately we reach out? Can liberty and equality ever fully dwell together? How so? By what sort of new human magic trick? Asphyxiated consciousness? Trepanning of the brain? Can prison guard and prisoner ever truly interchange? Night porter and night dissolve? Isn't it an avoidable truth, if not an immutable law, that, by dint of some perverse kind of moscillating and relentless predeterminism, they can never equalize who always seek to level? That the master in no matter how altruistic a mood or manner, lured by incongruity, compelled by incompatibilities,

charmed by inequality, is lowered by anything like a slave connection? Don't levelers in a society, as Edmund Burke observed, balefully "load the edifice of society by setting up in the air what the solidity of the structure requires to be on the ground"? Isn't the price of collective action to have to sit by like a dunce to watch the inevitable and unavoidable recession of an individual's full identity? Who that can see into the dark heart of man can ultimately *believe* in democracy? Did not Thomas à Kempis in the *Imitation of Christ* write, "Every time I go out among men, I come back less a man"? Didn't Noah Webster, a born definer, author of *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, describe the very idea of American democracy as "a monstrous inversion of the natural order of society?" To Webster it was a plague, prompting him to state, "Give the people power, and they are *all* tyrants as much as Kings. They are even more tyrannical, as they are less restrained by a sense of propriety or by principle of honors; more under the control of violent passions, exasperated by envy and hatred of the rich; stimulated to action by numbers; and subject to no responsibility." Wasn't it the celebrated Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes who in the name of democracy refused to uphold the voting rights of Southern blacks and affirmed the right of the Commonwealth of Virginia to sterilize poor women in institutions, prompting a disgusted Teddy Roosevelt to assert that he could sculpt a better justice out of a banana? But must it not be asked here why an appointed judge on the highest court of the land would not capitulate, especially in this land, to egalitarianism? Did he simply comprehend man as an animal with retarded desires?

We have to face a truth, all of it, proven even in the geometries. The horizontal is the antonym of the vertical, which in its imposing height must inevitably look down on the middling flatness of its rival with waking scorn! Only in transempirical equality can two people recognize democracy and manage to succeed. Do not many people who embrace democracy actually fear—and flee—freedom? Does not the common man who fears responsibility fondly wish to give up his freedom, as Ivan Karamazov accuses him of doing, lest he have to stand up for himself? What student of history will deny that freedom is as commonly handed over to a crowd as to a king? What is a crowd but a corruption? *In praesentia majoris cessat potentia minoris*: In the presence of the major, the power of the minor ceases. When has a crowd ever thrown out of its craw a real creator or a man of courage? We are not in the extreme the jumper on the ledge. We are the pathetic *crowd*!

It should not be the would-be suicide who invites our pity, rather the crowd in its obloquy, staring and hooting and pointing and laying bets on the victim's death as it gathers below in the street in the mockery of a huddling union. The man stands there, perched above them. He is focused, unrefuted, open, defiant, determined, fulgur-filled, and alone. The monster is in—*is*—the mass.

We join with each other, thought Eyestones in a melancholy reflection, in order to study in our union what we can personally savor of *exclusion*. The mirage—the floral illusion—of democracy is that it purports to include everybody, when it is in reality the banging drum not of the tenant farmer but the supreme suzerain. What proof could either he or Laura cite, what example offer, to prove that either of them had a whit of concern or a whisk of care or a whim of cooperation regarding each other? Had he not once read that mutualism among flowers and insects can be competitive as well as cooperative? Was it not true that to be successfully in love one must never encounter one's double? One's equal? Did not equality lead to an unreassuring stringency of shameless rivalry and vile envy and hideous competition? What by joining had they ever solved? What coupling necessarily constitutes comfort? Is it guaranteed by some Mendelian magic that the act of crossing a yellow wrinkled pea with a green pea will automatically produce a round green pea? Who dominates and what recesses that in the process one can feel confident of the final and inevitable strain? What will fission find and in the finding not find fatal? With one person attracted to another, a uranium nucleus developing a "waist" and breaking into two nearly equal fragments—where the neutron of pressure forces the uranium of personality to break down—can not the energy released, as one becomes two, be as destructive as an atomic bomb? After a not particularly long period Eyestones had come to see in any and all attempts at union with Laura not only the creation of an unnatural and petrifying tyranny on one hand and a loss of self on the other, but in either case a black mirage dominated by fantasms and futilities. Follow the dots of any couple of controversy. "Excuse me, but what are the grounds for divorce in this state?" asks Ginger Rogers playing Linda Keene in *Shall We Dance?* of the city-hall clerk. His logical answer? "Marriage!" What is the reason for the failure of democracy? *People!* No, decided Eyestones, he would stay alone—"No one knows better than I myself," as Fred Astaire sings in *The Band Wagon*, "I'm by myself, alone." A compact is only a centrifuge to secure the

vested interests of the investors, he came to see, with faction the only fee. "Only vacant freedom leaves all in the same anonymous crowd," observed the wise philosopher George Santayana.

> The passion for absolute democracy is the refuge of those who, being unable or unwilling to live in harmony with the hierarchy of nature and of the arts, and being at the same time conscious of the folly of subjective cosmologies, find at last an always contemporary absolute in an always different unanimity of mankind, to be secured by the continual suppression of minorities.

Santayana was correct.

Democracy, Eyestones concluded, is ironically the alchemy that, by a futile triumph that in the final analysis is always haled in to excuse its own defeat, dilutes and concocts a mob from its own indiscrete fraternity and in the process proves that a corrupt republicat duocracy such as our own, creating the rich by making the poor, can become in its black indirection an even bigger and more unholy trick. Must not the ultimate magician prestidigitate himself?

XXXI
Katabasis

Laura's conversation was jingle, sheer twit-twit, a blend of flip slang, 'zine clichés, oneirobabble, pop lyrics, and the kind of scrambled nature-mysticism found on the label of Dr. Bronner's "18-in-1" Pure Castile Soap and Peppermint Tonic, a bottle of which Eyestones once bought her in New York and which she always avidly read to pass the time macerating in the bath. ("I use it on buzzy," she once told him with leering knowingness.) Pathetically credulous, Laura was the kind of person who read and believed Nostradamus, exhaustively thermogating her brain over quatrain after quatrain for interpretations she swore would come true. Dr. Joyce Brothers with her simpering obvolutions was an intellectual to Laura. She read—and believed—*The Prophet* with its hoodoo and dustflap portrait of mustachioed Almustafa staring soulfully back at the reader like some Syrian cheapjack from a bad Thirties movie. She devoured the undermedicated novels of Ayn Rand and her 95-cent philosophy. Admitting she knew nothing about art, literature, politics, or culture, Laura always went on to demonstrate her point. Her trains of thought had no cabooses. Somewhere in California they arranged a picnic for which Laura chose the wine on the basis of nothing more than her having lived in that state for a few years; unfortunately, he soon realized that the extent of her knowledge was that Valpolicella was red and that Chardonnay was white. She could be as phony as the chuck-wagon sing-along at Knott's Berry

Farm that they had attended one lame afternoon by some inadvertence of planning, prompting Eyestones to write to Duxbak the only postcard he sent during the trip, except for the one of handsome *Titus*, Rembrandt's son, that he mailed to Chasuble—who loved the faces of beautiful youth—from a Los Angeles bookshop.

One afternoon, in an old jumble-and-antique shop in West Table, Missouri, Eyestones saw a fiddle and, encouraged by a big brigantine of a woman who came in from the attached general store and lifted it down from the wall, he took it from her. It was made of smooth maple, with a broken button, wobbly peg-box, and elongated bouts that sloped down like the hills outside. "Been there for years. You're welcome to try it, handsome." He smelled the wood. "I once wrote music, of a kind," he said. "It was composed in reference to—was 'made on,' as choreographers say—such an instrument." He plucked the strings, listened, ran his hand down the fingerboard, and gently, carefully, tuned each of the pegs, G, D, A, and E.

"Play something."

"Can you?" asked Laura.

The woman said, "I love fiddle."

Eugene smiled at her.

"You rusty, Boggle Goggles?" asked Laura.

He said nothing.

"You've probably forgotten how," said Laura, folding her arms.

"What should I play?"

"Something hick," said Laura, smirking.

Eyestones went to the front of the shop, looked out at the brown countryside and the hills undulating away to the far horizon, and picked up the bow. "Do you want fiddling? 'Whistling Rufus,' 'Floppy-Eared Mule,' 'Dusty Miller,' 'Chicken Reel,' 'The Devil's Dream'?" He laughed and scraped an A chord, "Stuff you hear in barns, at dances, at kitchen t-o-n-k-s," he spelled, "and pronounced"—he winked—'*tunks*.'" He remembered finding an old French violin in Saigon, and often to cheer up the boys in the barracks he played all the waltzes, rags, jigs and reels, rounds, and old folk songs they asked for, like "The Water Is Wide," "Nottamun Town," "John Barleycorn." No one spoke in the shop. He grew suddenly quiet, lifted the instrument to his chin, closed his eyes meditatively, and began to play "Shenandoah." He gave them "Settle Down," the theme from the movie *Red River*. Then George Whitefield Talbot's "Jubilee." He followed that

with "The Call of the Faraway Hills," an old American melody of such wistful, so lambent a sweetness, redolent of the West, that for a moment time itself seemed to stop. No one spoke. He played a Scottish air called "The Dark Island." When he then played the beautiful "Return to Kinsale," he heard a sob. It was astonishing. No one from strong emotion could suddenly talk in the mercy of that small compelling afternoon moment in Missouri. The pathos in the echo of that piece! He then played "The Last Rose of Summer." It was as if he had lifted a small piece of perfection from heaven, rocking left and right as he bowed up gentle beauty from the strings. The drawn notes were so lovely that even Laura herself, who was so used to ridiculing sentimentality and to "gnorming" Chasuble and to satirizing her poor sisters and to mocking virtually anything having to do with softness of heart—who, beyond anything else, was used to the dumb, atonal hog-calling and chaotic organ mush and unstructured, wince-inducing crapola of rock groups at clubs like the Middle East—was frankly astonished. As Eugene played, Laura and the big country woman stood there rapt, almost visibly rising as they listened to the refinement of his touch, the lilting, unexpected sonority transforming the air. When he had finished and set down the violin, nothing was said for the longest moment, not a word, except that the woman suddenly began to weep, silently, her mouth open, her hands trembling to wipe away the tears that were coursing down her cheeks. She emitted a sound, hoarse, abject, not loud, as if from the depths of some passionate and eternal regret and grief. There was silence. After a moment, she rose quietly and offered him the instrument out of appreciation, need, pressing it onto Eugene, but he could not accept it, he said, thanked her, and they drove away.

"You show-dog, you," said Laura.

It was typical of her, either joking sarcasm or a mood flat as a miller's thumb. Mania or depression. Dopey energy or disinvigorating dead-endedness. A spectacle of some kind or cynicism and sloth.

"At least you must be happy that I didn't play 'Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,'" he said.

"Your favorite hymn," she said.

"It is a paean to the Holy Spirit," Eugene replied. "The melody is heartbreakingly beautiful, and the words are all about art, inspiration, the grace of creation." He sang in a respectful voice,

"Come thou fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.

Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above;
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of God's unchanging love.

"Stow it," said Laura.

Although he was used to it by now, Eugene found with amazement that at times he even depended on Laura's negative effectiveness as a vehicle, a method, to frame his own subsequent thoughts by way of counterbalancing variation. In a way, he saw with added rue, it was also something of an ongoing validation regarding their anomalous situation in being together, even back then, to keep her at bay. She was in a sense a living foil to any dream he ever had of settling down with anyone, the end of hope with any kind of sumptuous fever of a life in love with someone. After learning somewhat later she had not only refused out of plain fear and apprehension to get a blood test for the AIDS infection—she was afraid of the results—but also flatly insisted she never would, Eugene would refuse to have anything to do sexually with Laura Warholic, a reluctance that derived from a wholly formed, however unpleasant to him, carefully arrived at, no matter how idiosyncratic to her, perception. Please, don't mind me, he thought, or *the more than 6000 infected Africans a day* who are currently dying from it! In consequence, Eugene's ardor-quotient with Laura went from uninquisitive in the beginning to curious to low to indifferent to—ultimately—nonexistent, registering on a rate-scale in terms of actual therms somewhere between laundering shirts and playing Parcheesi on a back porch in Utah during summer with some old, sun-bonneted Mother of Zion. Or, wondered Eyestones, was Cicero correct in his *De Senectute* where he confidently if paradoxically declared that nothing ever really troubled a person for which he or she did not in fact yearn? A void spread between his heart and heaven. It had been the way he saw the world for years. What then had changed? As Eugene was driving south now, southwest, for days, through Idaho, the only state in the country over which no foreign flag has ever flown—why did they bother to visit

Ronninger's Potato Farm?—looking up as usual into the vast, black, night sky overhead for the Great Space of Pegasus, the soft stars just above Cassiopeia comprising the enigmatic "autumn square"—it was, according to the knowing Babylonians, the doorway to Paradise—Eyestones saw, knew, felt that something had changed.

It was not anything he could name.

There is a shift of weather in the heart.

A sun naturally goes down, sinks.

Eyestones would remember one weary afternoon in a small hardware store out there in flyover country, somewhere in Lovelock, Nevada, or Carson City, where in a by-then typical fit of pessimism that summer, when he was getting three extra car-keys made, suddenly looking at Laura like a strange acquaintance, taking her in, as it were, with the suddenness of instant if dilapidated inspiration, he went from the confusion of what he should do with her to the sudden fact that he not only had no romantic feelings for her but did not even like her. It was an epiphanic moment, but due to what? Was it the clear air of the dry American desert? The starlight there? The tints charging through the day with the angle of sunlight, the shadows varying in hue? The small delicate flowers of purple verbena, blue lupines, red pentstemon, and the apricot-colored mallows? Or the desert caleche, the visible soil, the color of those houses the Impressionists elsewhere got so much mileage out of? What had he seen, staring through hundreds of colors, finally to see a sudden and unavoidable truth? He was not sure but it was there in a confessional surge he recalled in his head some lyrics from *The Rose of Algeria* (1908) by that wise old party, Victor Herbert:

> Love is like a cigarette
> (a cigarette may last as long)
> Lighted at a heart aflame.
> For a time its fire is strong
>
> Fragrant clouds then from us veil
> Ev'ry sorrow, ev'ry doubt,
> Till we wake at last to find
> That our cigarette is out.

Eugene was silent with his thoughts as they drove, debating wheth-

er they should try to see the top-secret Area 51, that military base near Rachel, Nevada, prohibited to everyone—were UFOs there?—and that mysterious black mailbox there. He stopped at Tikaboo Peak and got out. Although he encouraged her, Laura—whom he thought interested in thought-forms and telesmic images and tulpas—wouldn't budge from the car. The summer sun shimmered, sweltering heat lay on the land like an oafish giant, cracking the desert open and pressing down their car. Laura, reading a book, *Hugging: A Proviso for Life,* and snapping her gum, never looked up. He took a distant look. She showed no enthusiasm one way or the other. He left.

Skipping Las Vegas had created another huge argument, with Laura's mounting questions as to why reaching almost to a Spanish tempo—an agitated 5/4—but what did she want? To study some dumb replica of the hypostyle of Karnak? To see the Empire State Building and Eiffel Tower magically cast in epoxy-limestone chemical concrete? To try her hand at faro and lose the small swag she had? To check out the tasteful gift shops on the Strip and get a lucky bargain on a 14K sunburst medallion or a $1000 malachite pen-and-pencil set? To drive up at any hour of the day or night to the Clark County marriage-license office that keeps twenty-four-hours-a-day casino hours and get married without a blood test to the glory of some piped-in Wayne Newton or Barry Manilow ballad by some cross-eyed, self-ordained, non-denominational reverend with his wife in a housecoat as witness?

"I am *so* not going to talk to you for this," she proclaimed, glaring at him with her wet-toe-in-a-socket hair puffballing around her head from the suffocating heat. "I am so never going to forget it."

As they drove, Her Witnesslessness stared bleakly and silently out the window. In her hostility, facing away, she was either writing again in her journal, madly scribbling away like a Waldensian over a translation of Scripture or doing all sorts of sketches and drawings, the sort of amateur offerings that draw a response like "Bless her heart," an expression of condescension but no ill-will commonly given down South to a person not entirely responsible for a thing—bad drawing, dumb hobby—negatively evaluated.

"There's an old Thunderbird," said Eyestones, pointing. "It's a Triumph, the kind Marlon Brando rode in *The Wild One* with BRMC on the back of his jacket. The Black Rebel Motorcycle Club."

"Wowsie," said Laura sarcastically.

He wondered about her. Did she dream about stags? Did she dream

about deer? Did she dream about the wind and the rain in her hair? Did she speak about angels? What did they say? Did music somewhere in her heart start to play? Who was it held her? Gave her her part? Kissed her to fill up the hole in her heart? Why is a fountain? When is a tree? Who walks on the mountain? How breathes the deep sea? Are forests forever? Can honesty bend? How far is never? Why is the end? Wasn't it time to give voice to her soul? When did she whisper? Where did she cry? Will the feeling of kneeling before love ever die?

"May I ask you a question?"

"You already did."

A long black Rolls Royce touring-car passing by with a nude silver sprite on its radiator cap gave Eyestones the idea that he should find a rich young girl and disappear with her! *Wishes!*

Being with Laura was difficult. It was like working hickory. Constant battle. How often they were locked into a zero-sum model of the "I can't win unless you lose" sort! Yet for all the frustration and trouble, wasn't there in the simple, mindless, and worry-free assent to existence a kind of baseness? Tension in and of itself implied a togetherness of two. Tautness taught. Two modalities of feeling, like antiphonal chant. Sensation and idea. Wasn't it clear that he needed Laura to synthesize some dialectic of his own feverish origin? Was it his neurosis or near-blindness that she served him like a residual fault he found in himself he needed corroborated? "Yes, I love my neighbor as myself—pity me!" It was a way of looking. Astronaut Dick Gordon of the Apollo 12 mission always said, "When people ask what he discovered when we went to the moon, I reply, 'The earth.'" Strangely, Eyestones needed Laura to see himself, even if he willed what he did not wish for.

"Can't you talk to me?" he asked.

"About?"

"Anything."

"Like?"

"Opinions."

"Whose?"

"Yours."

She sighed with exasperation. "OK."

"Respond."

"To?"

"Words."

"Shoot."

He cleared his throat. "Hard."
"Boys."
"Mother."
"Cipher."
"Sex."
"Filth."
"Father."
"No."
"God."
"Horseshit."
"Depressing."
"You."
"Thanks.
"You're welcome."

I'm not perfect, Eyestones thought, *so I'm perfect for you*. His efforts on her behalf rarely had any effect. She seemed to have the binocular vision of a perch! How can light make something dark? he wondered. Don't shadows emanate from bodies themselves? It was crazy. Unreal. Was this somehow the world of quantum mechanics? The way things worked on a subatomic level? Could Wilhelm Stekel, one of Freud's colleagues, have been right when he declared that it was hate, not love, that formed the bonds that held people together? Wasn't it Shakespeare who told us "most friendship is feigning"? But there they were, yoked together. Bourée and gigue. A one-inch nail is a twopenny. Once a project is screwed up, it came to him, anything you do to improve it will make it worse. Wasn't that Finagle's Law?

Laura's mood improved by the time they finally got to Los Angeles, that endless suburbopolis of repetition and waste sprawling outward for hundreds of miles in a vast and uninventoriable insanity of seething silver smog. Souvenirville. Land of Funshine. Motels, malls, billboards. A fretwork of scrubvilles, hysterical with signs. Unvarying and improbable high haze, wrong-warmth, daily fogs, morning gloom, and surfside glare. Endless freeways, miles of highways, streams of bumper-fucking traffic coming out of yellow fire-trap canyons and endless knotted exurbs choking the life out of the entire state. But as to his traveling companion, Eyestones had been warned. Who was it said reflection was born on a day of evasion? It was best he look at the facts at hand and understand them. He had read Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, of which his life with Laura often provided a living exemplum: her hollow

threats to bolt ("Do not pursue an enemy who simulates flight"), his reaction to that ("When you surround an army, leave an outlet free"), and more than anything her hints at returning to a life of abandonment he saw she would assume when they got back east ("When there is much running about, it means that the critical moment has come").

They stopped for breakfast at a roadhouse. Eugene had "jailhouse soup," bread and garlic. Laura ordered poached eggs and corned-beef hash. "Nixon's favorite breakfast," said Eugene, reminding himself that they were in California. He pointed to her dish. "He ate that exact meal—read his blame-shifting memoirs—the very morning he resigned in disgrace on August 9, 1974. A Friday. Like every other day in his life." Laura shrugged indifferently. *Don't shadows emanate from bodies themselves?* he thought again. She was looking at him as if he were crazy. She put down her fork. "This stuff tastes like those horrid sandwiches we bought at Dinosaur Quarry, Utah, in 108 degrees—try it." He took a bite of toast. "As Martha Stewart, the queen of householdry, would say, 'Very delicious.'"

They drove down through the dung-brown hills out of the lizard-dry air and smog and along various boulevards in zoomorphic Hollywood with its eateries in the shape of hot dogs and movie theaters resembling Damascene mosques and real-estate offices done up like Egyptian temples and beminareted palaces of Babylon and funeral homes done up with Baghdadian windows and doorways. They walked around the downtown area that was riddled with tourists, which Laura, animatedly skipjacking about in flip-flops and unprepossessing halter-top, positively loved. Eyestones's heart was not in it, but he tried, was trying. He hated crowds. A crowd is a personality. An irrational number. An absolute tribunal. Swayable. Cruel. Up to no good. It was no different for him back in schoolyard days where he kept to himself and habitually went to the far side. He came to understand why Marilyn Monroe disliked Los Angeles, a place Aldous Huxley called "Metrollopis," an empty and splattered-out suburbanscape. "Even though I was born there," Marilyn once remarked, "I still can't think of one good thing to say about it. If I close my eyes and picture L.A., all I see is one big varicose vein."

They went swimming at the beach in Santa Monica, paid their respects with a rose—at Eugene's insistence—at Marilyn Monroe's crypt at the mortuary in Westwood Memorial Park, and walked through the Farmer's Market where in a sandwich shop Laura was served a

cup of coffee that, although whiter than George Wallace, she drank rather than offend the good-looking waiter whose profectitiously tight pants she found the need to comment on, with a smile, as being "extra shiny." She snapped her fingers on both hands and laughed. "Puff pastry," she had squealed, he recalled, as they drove through the town of Hollister, California, suddenly sitting up to gesture southwest with her nodding head as she spotted, with his road-girl, a moose-bodied biker in leather, a fat bemustachioed road-monk with a headwrap of the Star and Stripes racing along deep in zazen on the tatami-mat of his hog, a Harley "Fat Boy" with custom-stretch handlebars, chrome Thunderstar wheels, long shotgun exhaust pipes, and bullethole decals on the dirigible-sized gas tank. "*Po-ta-to, po-ta-to*," said Eugene, laughing. To which Laura with impish delight replied, "*Chuk-chuk*!" She bounced in her seat. "I wanna be a biker mama," she cried out. She liked to bait him with such extravagance by way of her hypertrophically developed sense of competition, often pretending to solicit his advice simply to find out what he thought of her, and then hold it against him. The joke was that he not only saw through her game and its attributions but rarely took her seriously in the first place. "'Chicks,'" quoted Eugene, "'Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em, can't use their bones for soup.'" "What?" inquired Laura, leaning back shocked. "It's a famous quotation," laughed Eugene who, shaking his head, said, "Thoughts of Chairman Sonny Barger." "Who's that?" she asked with a disapproving frown. "It doesn't matter."

One afternoon it was raining so hard that vision was impaired and they found a motel. After a few hours, Eugene, who was getting claustrophobic after being awakened from a nap by the noise of the television, suggested that they take a walk. Laura was watching a Hollywood game-show in which a fat wife with a barnyard face was angrily clobbering her husband over the head with his answer card as he stammered in vain to explain why he had stated that her best friend had the best body in a bikini of all the women they both knew. Watching the stupidities on the television screen and Laura's fascination with them reminded a sadly pensive Eugene, among other things, that although young Tocqueville had spent only nine and a half months in the young America of 1831—to make a study of penitentiaries at that—he had been strangely prophetic in his baleful assessment of both the imbecilities to which a democracy can descend and of the wayward "tyranny of the majority." Eugene snapped off the set and they left. The cease-

less disagreeable rain held. Trees hissed and muttered in what looked like the beginning of a full gale as they dodged through the plunging rain. "Tess," said Eugene, laughing, holding up his bare face to the splashing drops. Laura frowned. "Tess. As they sing in the song 'They Call the Wind Mariah,'" he offered helpfully. "From *Paint Your Wagon*? The musical?" "Geek," said Laura, running under some awnings.

They both ducked into a chain bookstore, where a tallish, spotty-faced, middle-aged novelist with a British accent was giving a diffident reading from his new book that relied as to both title and theme on Sherlock Holmes. He moved back and forth up front with a polyester jocularity that was belied by his nervousness that was made worse by his holding his angular body close to himself as if he were cold. His wide ears seemed almost aerodynamic. He wore glasses. He had odd, protruding eyes, a longish nose that seemed to drop off of his forehead, and the kind of brush-cut that gave him the look of perpetual surprise. Awkward, gawky, unathletic, he was all head-voice with a crowflight of dark, heavy eyebrows and the kind of restrictive indifference of personality that was as bathetic as the dull, endless pages of his unimaginatively bad prose—the tedious plot of the novel involved a bug-faced lady with curly hair whom Sherlock Holmes satirically pursued—the owlish writer seemed to be reading exclusively to a big-titted redhaired woman in the front row there with whom, in spite of his wedding ring (she wore none), he seemed conspiratorially chummy. No one had a less sincere smile. A tall, readerly looking type with a beard standing next to Laura yawned loudly and was just leaning over to mutter to her "A waste of trees" when suddenly rushing past the twenty or so people gathered in the bookstore there a racing black blur—a bug-faced lady with curly hair, it turned out, screeching incomprehensible malice at the top of her deranged and outraged voice—raised a handgun as he screeched, "*No, no Donnah, this is not about you!*" and shot him dead. It was almost impossible to comprehend. Police were there in minutes, an arrest was made, the culprit carted away

"What was *that* about?"

"He had betrayed her."

"How do you know?" asked Laura, badly shaken.

"He used her name."

"The guy she shot?"

"When he cried out. It was a last plea for intimacy—mercy, I daresay—on his part. I suspect it was his angry wife who shot him. He

had obviously betrayed her—in print, maybe the most craven form of cowardice." While Laura, calling upon another, darker side of herself, now began to ponder if she herself could ever kill anyone, Eugene as they walked said to her, "Were you aware that one of the thieves who died on the cross on Calvary next to Jesus Christ is the only recorded person in the Gospels who ever addressed our Lord simply as 'Jesus'? Others called him Master, Jesus of Nazareth, Lord, 'Jesus, thou son of David,' but no one other than Dismas ever called him Jesus."

"Dismas?"

"The thief on the cross."

"He betrayed Christ."

"Wrong. Because he loved Christ, he didn't want to betray him. But betrayal and love are linked."

"By?"

"The betrayed," said Eugene. "That writer back there was describing the very woman who shot him."

"Describing her?"

"Right."

"Where?"

"In his book."

"So who are *you*? Sherlock Holmes?"

"You were listening, perhaps, but not watching. I happened to notice the other woman sitting in the front row."

"But did you see that guy cringe?" Laura was actually horrified. "I can't believe we have just witnessed a fucking *killing*."

"Or execution."

"What if it was the wrong guy she shot?"

"It wasn't."

"But *if*."

"It would be absurd."

Police cars raced away.

When they got back to their own car, they found a $30 parking-ticket tucked under a windshied wiper. Not again! Hadn't Laura put the quarters in the parking meter after he had asked her to? "I thought I did," said Laura, surlily getting into the car and slamming the door. "Remember Onan?" asked wet Eugene, poking his rained-on head through the window. "Onan?" "In the Bible." "The Bible again?" asked Laura. Eugene held up a coin in order to make a witticism. "It's got to go in the slot to count." Uncomprehending but irked, Laura

haughtily rolled up the window against any further discourse and folded her arms to sit back. To calm down Eyestones took a walk down the street to buy a postcard and to send it to Chasuble.

They sought other diversions. They looped over to some of the old Western movie locations like Chatsworth and Lone Pine and Corriganville. They visited Colmer, where there are more dead people—graveyards—than living people. They attended a carrot carnival in Holtville; stopped by to join in Whiskey Flat Days in Kernville—mule races and an old-time fiddler's contest, where Laura flirted with two handsome banjo players—and after stopping for gas in memorable Parkfield, ground-zero for earthquakes in the United States, the last big temblor having taken place there in 1966, where hundreds of bumperstickers in town read "Be Here When It Happens," even drove down into the desert as far as Indio but out of their usual poor planning managed to miss the Date Festival and spent the night in a grim motel sleepily watching on the Late Show a racist neo-safari movie starring Cornel Wilde called *The Naked Prey*, up to the brutal scene where several elephants are pointlessly slaughtered when Eugene shut off the set in disgust. "I wanted to watch it," complained Laura with a great wodge of a cookie in her hand. They were snug, conjoined like two copper beech nuts. "I will not lie here and watch animals being killed, even in a movie," he said. Laura sat up stone-faced. She got out of bed, grabbed a pillow, went to the sofa, and just before pulling a blanket over her head muttered, "Don't you see you are o-l-d?"

And you aren't d-u-l-l?

They drifted up to Oregon and Washington strictly because that was where they allow the medical use of marijuana but skipped all the major cities. Fed up with Laura, Eugene asked her, "Want to go to Seattle where drinking coffee is a religion and the height of revelry is singing 'Kumbaya' while kayaking?" On the afternoon that they passed through Ariel, Washington, where in 1971 skyjacker and mysterioso-thief DB Cooper successfully parachuted in mid-flight out of a 727 with $200,000 in cash and was never caught, Eugene wanted to shout to Laura—grumpily—*people can disappear!* On an overcast day at the Bonneville Dam, a half hour east of Portland, Oregon, where under a huge oversized sign *Bank on the Pacific Northwest* (commercial? spiritual?) they watched shoal upon shoal of silvery salmon flap upstream to their spawning grounds, a resolved Eugene abruptly turned from the setting sun, taking his cue, and found the exact location to

start driving back east.

What was it, Eugene wondered, with the phrase "Pacific Northwest"? Was there an *Atlantic* Northwest he hadn't heard about? What in the hell? Did people in the northeast live in the Atlantic northwest?

So they turned and headed back to Boston. Another three thousand miles, he thought. Another long haul. Up, up, up needs down, down, down. The summit is only the halfway point on an ascent, he realized, recalling his mountain-climbing days. Which climber was it who said, "Getting to the top is optional, but getting to the bottom is compulsory?" They visited the Corn Palace in Mitchell, South Dakota, and roamed around the semi-arid, sawtoothed divides of the Badlands—*les mauvaises terres pour traverser*—where because Laura stubbornly wore her clumpy black shoes they had to turn back from a walk. "Did you know that a string of old shoes suspended across a road is the worst of all Hindu insults?" he asked. Laura glared at him. The sun X-raying the cartilage of her large ears gave them pink lights. She frigidly said, "'Thanks for the sour persimmons,' said Daffy Duck."

Riding along, usually sipping a Shasta black cherry cola and munching from a packet of French fries or eating a huge cinnamon sugar-snail, she would be listening to music or humming the songs of Cheap Trick or the Beatles or the Dils, particularly their song "I Hate the Rich,"

> . . . dddlddl
> they should dig the ditch
> I wanna life without a hitch
> ddddl lddlddl
> all's they want is money
> It's not so funny.

If envying the rich was a predominant theme with her—she could mockingly and quite cattily descend into the particulars of their love of milled soaps, colognes, expensive boots, fashion trips to Manhattan, silver-backed hairbrushes, anything, *everything* from owning Irish setters to horseback-riding to trips to Martha's Vineyard—she was no kinder to retarded people ("Can't they work in pet shops?") or senior citizens ("Old people are no good at everything"). Or she would say things like "Can you believe Pamela Des Barres turned down Mick Jagger in order to remain loyal to Jimmy Page?" and "A drummer in a band

always has to be cute" or "What's a vow and what happens when it sours?" and "I have tarry bowel movements" and "Do you think that my thinking about young boys—I mean, you know, teenagers—is aberrant?" and "I can't fucking stand wealthy girls" and "I'd like to see Warholic humiliated on an international scale. I'd love to see a paragraph about the pathology of name-changing, with the name he hates most, 'Minot the Kike,' included. I'd love the world to know he's a welfare/food-stamp cheat, a man who hits women and pushes people off barstools, an impotent slob who tries to suck up to second-rate authors like Mary Gaitskill and Harry Mathews and Kathy Acker and junkie strippers and klub kids! Plus he owes me major money which he stole from me." From Telluride to Santa Fe, three hundred miles, was one long and extended rehearsal of her vague ills and diffuse anxieties. "And he claims he is a writer—when he never wrote anything? What a dumb violent bastard. One taco short of a combo platter! If it wasn't for his mother's money, he'd be broke."

Warholic. Never was he far from matters Warholic. by, with, to, or from. Crass. Loud. A weasel. Now juiceless. In his awfulness, to Eugene, he was Marsyas Eyestones come alive—Eugene often confused his boss with his own brother. Devils in rebozos. Detractors. Disguised fiends. Cheats. People who wanted to look magnanimous, but were deeply small-souled. Short, crowing bowsers unforeseen, dreadful, and vain who were empty and cold as perdition. Thank you, Ephialtes!

Eugene said, "I can't picture you kissing him."

"*Kissing him*?" she squealed, holding up a half-bitten Drake's Funny Bones. "Got any laxative on ya? It was like a bad dream run over by a crooked bus! Ick!"

Eugene paused a moment. He was confused. "But he got you pregnant, at least that's what you once told me." He turned to her. "Right? Twice, you said. So it was he who went and got you pregnant. Not that redhaired auto-shop guy over in Queens—?"

"The one with the big beer can? No."

"No?"

"Can't you hear me?"

"OK."

"For chrissakes, don't you ever listen? Can't you see? You do have problems seeing, don't you? Even with those Coke-bottle glasses of yours?" She exhaled a breath of sour impatience. "All of that happened back in New York. In New York City, OK? Way before I went

to San Francisco. Jesus!"

"Big bald Warholic, the swordsman! I thought he was King of the Cats back there in San Francisco, numero uno with the gin-fizz kittens, solid with the low-rider badasses. And now you're claiming he was impotent."

"Sir Droop-a-lot? Put him on your weird sex-list. He *was* impotent!"

People who have chronic depression often have even worse problems with their memory than others, he knew. One feeds the other. He had had a glimpse of it before regarding Laura herself who had no sense at all of recollection and who always fell through logic the same way mankind fell through Eve. But when in that bizarre and entangled *chinoiseries administratifs* of her mind had true clarity ever prevailed? In many ways she was a lot like Warholic herself, in her compulsive approbation-hunting seeking to shift the blame by telling lies—and of course whoever by definition shifts the blame has to blame another—but even telling lies in such a way that not even the *opposite* was true. It was not so much what she said of him was false as what she showed of herself was not true. None of the right answers. all of the smart moves. She had always stressed the irrationality of her former husband's anger over his impotence, furthermore, as if somehow to reverse the point that really needed to be made. If Warholic were actually impotent over long periods of time and not the brainless and indiscriminate duckfucker coursing through the world like certain fish who spray an alkali before laying their eggs in acidic waters, did the man not require an alternate way of releasing tension? It was clear that he was a monster of loss, a victim of his depletion urges. Was it possible he was an alcoholic and, drinking too much, could not maintain an erection, what was laughably called Brewer's Droop?

Thieu nang luc, thought Eugene. It was the plague of many veterans he knew who could never adjust stateside and who lived feeling diminished.

"What a joke that he was always calling people *faygeleh,* you know, queer? I *told* you, blimps are limps!" impatiently snapped Laura, targeting Eyestones sharply one night in August passing the bullet-ridden township sign of Anticlimax, Wyoming (pop. 24), under a sturgeon moon. The moonlight made her look slat-thin and old. He saw crowfeet. She was talking with rue about Warholic, and his sexual inadequacy. "Sometimes when I got drunk," she laughed, "I'd ask him

'When is an elephant heavier that an elephant? When it is led!' Get it?"

They drove by acre after acre of old fences and empty fields running into the distance. Eugene, interrogating his unconscious to discover if he might not have secretly desired and so fostered the very idea of it, saw how paradoxically well that distasteful indisposition fit Warholic's hopeless arrogance and insufferable attempts by way of constant boasting to look sexually frenzied. Watches are generally most vulnerable where the stem enters the case. "Soft as an ankle-sock," added Laura with a snort. "Nothing worked for that fat bastard in the bedroom, except his paranoia." She paused. "Ever hear of Caverjet?"

"No," said Eyestones.

She did a comic double-take. "I thought you're the one who's supposed to know all about this shit. A shot for a shove in the shaft of the dick? With a needle? His *penis* looked more like the needle. I wanted to thread it, rather than suck it. After fifteen minutes or so, it supposedly gets you hard for an hour? Even with someone who had a micropenis with a bell-end that looked like a filbert and should be resigned to a lifetime of sex in the dark—with mice! Well, half the time that even failed to work for that kreplach—crunching zero. A military band wouldn't have helped! As they say, some are showers, some are growers." She hocked out a derisive laugh. "He was neither. Floppola!"

"So he could still—"

He paused.

"And I would let him? Why, so I could go and give birth to another freakazoid like Lobster Boy? Get serious."

"Who?"

"Abe? The office placenta?"

"I told people he was a flop in bed, I didn't give a shit," she laughed. "That's why he used to call me 'The Electric Ant.'" She looked over at Eugene. "Do you know that Philip Dick story, 'The Electric Ant'? Science fiction isn't your thing, right? The narrator after an accident discovers in the end that he himself is an android. So he kills himself in despair by cutting his 'reality-supply construct tape.' He couldn't endure he himself had become a goddam moonbat."

Laughing, thinking of hypocritical Warholic who was always crowing, regarding sex, that it was better to go out burnished with use than rusty from principle, Eugene tapped Laura's knee and quoted, "'And there shall come a rod out of the stem of Jesse.'"

"What?"

"Skip it," he said. Came a pause. "And so?" She had turned her head away. "How did you get—"

"Get?"

"You know."

"Knocked up?"

"A bull? A lightning bolt? A shower of gold?" He paused. "Don't tell me by the Holy Ghost?"

"Forget about it."

"Was he a bdelloid? Wait, don't tell me. Warholic was one of those rotifers who can reproduce without sex and yet have survived for a hundred million years?"

Multiple layers of color contrasted in her cheek, and she went through more hand-gestures in a minute, exformative but embarrassed, than the whole history of Buddhist mudras. She started to squeeze and unsqueeze her hands. In the widening gap of silence he felt her keen awkwardness.

"I was fucking a friend of his," she confessed, inhuming a long sigh, putting paid to the idea that nothing guarantees silence better than shame. *I used to sell kisses for the milk fund*, Eugene heard Marilyn Monroe coo in *Some Like It Hot*. That of course had been a movie. But he should not have been surprised that Laura was not embarrassed. She raised an eyebrow, smiled, and added with a whipped-butter tone, "The guy was like over the top, totally hypnosexual."

"You mean *hypo*sexual?"

"Right."

"That word means that he had a *low* sex drive."

"Well, it was quite the opposite with him, Butter Cookie."

"You didn't use . . . protection? No IUD?"

Even as he asked, he was thinking, as he recalled Laura's camel-like walk, how ironic, for the first IUDs had been actually pebbles placed in the uteruses of camels, so they would not get pregnant in the desert.

"We were usually drinking."

"Drinking or drunk?"

"Take your pick!" She laughed inappropriately, trying to fob a sad and unhappy grimace as joyful. "I fucked him in a red egg-shaped room, filled with, like, fiber-optics and the sound of, um, electronic music." Laura smiled. "He used to use polyurethane love gloves, which are twice as thin as latex and allows for"—she took him in sideways

with a sly smirk tilled with lemony exultation—"more heat transfer." She showed an authority in her report he had not seen before. "He lived over on Sixth Street. I used to go over twice a week. It was a dive. Thing is, it was the fact of its being a dive that made me horny! He would walk around for hours with a goddamn hard-on so big that you could salute it, baby, a stiffy as hard as—"

"—as Chinese arithmetic?" offered Eugene wryly. "I'm truly impressed."

"I was going to say, a Scaltrissimo ripper."

Sex for her, he knew, was as in guitar-playing a trade-off of speed for clarity. Transactional sex: no need of a relationship. That was the arousal template. Out of a submerged terror, she had no rules. Rules create patterns, patterns are detectable, what is detectable, one not only has to answer for but explain. Was not Thomas Jefferson correct when he observed that nothing is ours that another may deprive us of? If that is true, why try to possess anything?

Orbiting the room of memory, she folded her arms over her peen-flat breasts and reminisced. "We drank. Tons. I'd get smack-hammered. I was kinky. I got a 'Tiffany Box' down there: got my pubic hair dyed everywhere except for a small square patch in front about the size of a Tiffany ring box, which I bleached and then dyed egg-shell blue! Hey, you know what I always say, let your freak flag fly! I always wore wispy panties, my go-to romancing tool, and then order him to obey me," she offered with a lilting laugh that matched her appetite for caprice. "I'd say, 'Take 'em off—only with your nose!'"

"You'd tell him that?"

"Why not?"

Eugene, imitating her, repeated her command with martial mania. "No, that's too comic. Did you coo it? 'Take them off—only with your nose.'"

Laura's mouth wreathed angrily. "What do you know about women's voices?"

Eugene replied, "What do you know about what I don't know about women's voices?"

"He was cute and young and liked to do the hanky-panky. Is that what you want to hear?" She shrugged. "I like to fuck. That's me, OK? I do things, I get in trouble. I'm from a damaged family, I recognize it." Laura would often try to use formal, syllogistic sentences to seem more convincing, but her conversation was often strung out, aimlessly,

almost visually, like those repetitive "art" sculptures of Carl Andre and Donald Judd and Eva Hesse. "I'm strange, I guess, I don't deny it. I like pretty boys who look like girls, slim guys with nice lines and delicate-shaped bones, you know?" Have we descended, he wondered, to oddball feminist Camille Paglia's unwholesome assertion that children are sexy? "We wanted to have no regrets," she confessed, laughing, and with one eye raised in an accent grave, said, "We tried new sex positions like the 'Door Jam' and 'Speak to My Bum' and 'The Pink Batuta' and 'Solving the Squirrel Problem'—like you go whipping around like a humming-top around on all fours, making little cheeping sounds—and did it at the back of a church and in a tiny closet and once on black Halston ultrasuede bedcovers—oooohh, naughty, naughty—which he boosted from a Lord & Taylor's, and in a Ford Cutlass and twice in a doorway over on Montgomery Street and one night on a floor of spread-out album covers and, and, and, and, and," she hummed for a moment, temporizing, "oh yeah, once on a pile of big pink balloons. Blown up. Added bounce. Why? You jealous?"

"And with those niceties out of the way?"

"Pony time!"

While much that Laura said seemed probable, many of her remarks even back during that cross-country trip proved to be lies. Perversely symmetrical, Laura's lies were, uncannily—almost comically—almost always diametrically the *opposite* of the truth, as easy to locate as a hemisphere, simply because they were as big and bold and blustering. He came to see she was only a variation of her ex-husband. Thinking of that, Eyestones recalled a sentence that he had once recorded for his file cabinet after reading Whit Masterson's novel *Touch of Evil*: "After a few years of marriage, a man and a woman will generally discover that they are sharing more than a bed, board and bank account. The sharing also extends to intangibles, such as moods. It is seldom the case that one frowns while the other smiles and vice versa." A couple co-deludes itself. A husband dresses his wife in the vestments of his own needs, and she does the same to him, not actually looking at what each other is, rather what they want the person to be—until those needs shift and their true characters are revealed. But doesn't pity do the same? Eyestones wondered. Clothe someone with the drape of need? And isn't pity part of love? It was with such speculations that by way of a kind of Aristotelian vaccine Eyestones studied the evil—the insanity in the Warholics' life—so that he could avoid it himself, inocu-

lating himself from the disease by means of a small dose. It occurred to him that one thing Laura greatly feared in her ex-husband was that he might sue her for money he had lent her. Or had he taken any of her money? Eyestones well knew how connivers like Warholic could be on all sides simultaneously. The thimble-rigger's gambit. He had that craven, opportunistic ability of the politician, working one side of the fence while some bill was being amended and perfected and then quickly switching to the other side or being conveniently absent when the measure came to the final vote. His conscience was not his guide, only his accomplice. Laura of course knew of and bitterly despised Muskrat and Squishy and every chance she got railed against them as she did all of her despised ex-husband's girlfriends, the many she had mentioned, Zoe and Mary and Anina and Delia and even Gayle, her so-called enemy-friend, and how he had betrayed her with them, fulminating in constant outbursts against the lot of them with an irrational and childish fury that Eyestones traced back, simply because he thought she did, to the one man in her life he was convinced she truly hated: her spineless and ungenerous father.

"He had a habit of eating gargantuan breakfasts—or 'breftests,' as my father would say—and then lying on a couch like a python who had just swallowed a goat."

"Your father?" asked Eugene.

"*Warholic!*" She paused, swallowed angrily. "My father was too cheap to buy food for anybody, only for himself." She swallowed her bile. "He is cheap and cold and selfish—"

"There is no reason—"

"—and frigid and secretive and uncaring. Most of all, hard-boiled."

"I thought frigid covered that."

"*Evil covers that!*"

Beyond anything, Laura harbored a deep and abiding loathing for that man, whom she derogated at length and blamed for all her faults and whom with a robogeek's tunnel memory and splintery fury she continually castigated, along with his second wife, Lurleen, whose own grown-up sons by a previous marriage he vastly preferred over her. A fatal streak of insecurity fueled a weakness her lack of growth however depended on in order to hate her father forever as the sole destroyer of her life. It was the very opposite of the "he whose father is a judge goes to court with assurance" syndrome. More than anything, it seemed

to prove what Eugene had always held as an air-tight theory: hatred, like love, is a projected phenomenon—that person alone is hated who reminds one unpleasantly of one's self. Eugene had been correct. Her parents had died only because, figuratively, she had killed them, and they had never been mourned. In her grievances, Laura could quote him scenes verbatim of the many instances that her father had wounded and hurt her, but one stood out more than others; once when she was younger, after doing something wrong she had apologized for it—Eugene had heard the story a hundred times and knew it by heart—whereupon her heartless and censorious father crossly replied, "I do not believe you are really sorry! You just want to get off the hook!" Oh no, thought Eugene, groaning, here it comes again, and again, the Redundancy Olympics.

But Laura was in high report. She had hoarded the recollection. She dragged out all the archival footage. "He's a hack architect! He's cheap! He's obsequious. He ignores his own kids. Like a Russian judge, he always consistently gave me low scores, always blowing long and hard about how I had disappointed him and how he had wasted all of his money on me and how as a daughter I was going nowhere, but do you know what? I couldn't care less. He once told me he was going to spend all his savings in his lifetime—*told* me that! Can you understand? Are you awake? That's why my mother took and takes drugs, Desyrel for depression, Restoril for insomnia, uppers and downers. And sits there in a complete fog and watches the endless troop of hook-nosed Jewish morons all over radio and television that Discknickers hates when he's playing 'Who's the Jews?' like Jerry Springer, Sally Jesse Raphael, Rikki Lake, Isaac Misrahi, Mike Wallace, Barbara Walters, Larry King, Charlie Rose, Howard Stern, Maury Povich, Wolf Blitzer, Dr. Laura Schlesinger, Kudlow and Kramer, Judge Judy, Aaron Brown, *The Abrams Report*, Ted Koppel on *Nightline*, Paula Zahn, Gerry Bachman, that dwarf Michael Savage, *The Daily Show* with glimpy Jon Stewart and phony Dr. Joy Brown, both of whom changed their names from Glickstein or Glopstein or something, and that fucking narcissistic hop-frog Geraldo Rivera with his misaligned jut-jaws who, according to Discknickers, is half-Jewish. Fifteen years ago, my father reluctantly wrote me a check for $5000 for my college tuition and can you believe it that after all these years he is still waiting for that money to be returned? 'What about a refund on that tuition?' he goes. What a fuck-over moment! Screw the bastard! I flipped him

off! *Dessalata* should be written on *his* grave!" She screamed out loud in a voice shrill with a kind of antinomian metal, "*I disappoint him! I've disappointed that man all my life! Don't you see? Don't you fucking see?*" She began to shake, to tremble. She seemed unable to recover not because she had been a loving daughter but because she was consumed with hatred over having *not* been one. *Resentment*, thought Eyestones, *the cancer of emotions*. These were not mere issues between them—she *hated* her father. Fathers and daughters. Eugene recalled reading that Confederate General Stonewall Jackson warned his wife not to hug their daughter too tightly, for he superstitiously believed that if you loved people too much, God would take them. But this was the horrid reverse. "Even now he tries to hurt me and deal me a low blow—and he *succeeded!*" she madly revociferated. "He says I have no artistic talent! He claims I can't draw! I never even thought of that possibility and now a whole new vista of feeling bad about myself has opened up before me, thanks to him!" As she screamed, Eyestones, who already knew her father to be a self-referential and uncaring, passionless dunce could actually *see* Laura's inability to love and be loved, as if she wore it, like those cheap plaid shirts she had boosted from thrift shops and that struck him as matching with criss-crossing exactitude the lies and deceit by which she lived and betrayed all who knew her. She spat with curdling disgust. "I thought talent was what I *did* have and only lacked drive, ambition, and ideas. Now maybe I actually *can't* paint or draw anything well, even it I tried to!"

During that first year he knew her, Laura showed him an occasionally effusive letter her father wrote her, self-satisfied but full of emotional bombast for what with a little application she could do. Refusing any genuine love, he pretended to care for her with the pretense he could not deny any of her wishes—in fact, it all masked total indifference. It was this deceit that made Laura so unfit to face life and its emergencies. She was living proof of his failures. And yet what about her who without hesitation criticized her mother, her father, others who loved her, anybody? Unlike most serial killers who, married with children, could not hurt any woman or women they knew but without so much as a shrug would slaughter others—it is known in psychiatric circles as "splitting"—she seemed to abuse *only* those who cared for her.

Or did she believe no one did?

Eugene would never forget how one night right out of the blue—oddly, it was at the Clifton Motel in Paso Robles, California, where

in January 1954 Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe had spent their honeymoon—with a spate of fiendish schizofluxing curses, as the ghost of that same father apparently rose like foggy damp into her visual crosshairs, while bats flew out of her eyes and circled and landed on her infuriate hands, Laura screamed, "White devils should fuck him in hell!" It was a cry of such insistent fury and unresolved anger that it actually seemed to wake her up. She jolted! A zombie jerked! Eugene sat up groggy and half-asleep. Scarlet of face, drawn, breathless, she angrily swallowed her bile, gulping, hiccupping with malice, having to wait a full five minutes before she could declare in a cold, dead voice, "Whatever the case, his refusal to accept my apologies eventually made me choose to harden myself against him, creating a coldness within me, an icy barrier, that persists to this day." She turned bitterly to look at Eugene, her lower lip jutting out like a grilse's. "You can say what you want. That indifference I will never forget."

Blinking, Eugene opened a window for some air.

"Or forgive?"

"No way."

"You may, eventually," he said.

"Next?"

Moonlight filled the room. She slogged off to the bathroom and returned with a glass of water.

"I hate that brightness," she complained, waving it away.

He pulled half a curtain. "It's the 'old woman who never dies,'" he said, "as the Sioux called the moon."

"Make it die," she snapped.

She yanked the full curtain shut.

Eugene said nothing. It was actually the first time he realized that she was on a mission, filled not with guilt but rather hate residuals. He came to the stark realization that just as those to whom good things came by way of inheritance are often the last to comprehend their own advantage, those left to suffer parental neglect, never mind disdain, learn early of it and roam the world like jackals seeking revenge. Why else would this burn a hole in her sleep? Why else would she have slashed a painting at the MFA, as he had heard she did? Laura, turn. Her sad sisters retarded and locked away, turn. Her mother, vacant and lost, turn. Her mendacious father, turn. Her old, illiterate grandmother in Syracuse, turn. What a kaleidoscope!

Wasn't there a standard principle in this folklore of mathemati-

cal physics even schoolboys knew? "If certain causes produce certain effects then the symmetry of the causes reappear in the effects produced." Who, including even the most charitable, could not help but taxonomize a scatterplot of data by way of it all and not wish for a way out?

They flew through Missouri, Illinois. She was still fulminating about her father. And yet for all the spleen and shadow it would get even worse. "My father is a weak and pathetic man," she cried. He had heard that often. "He is not like others. He is not only weak but so fucking shady I can't begin to tell you." Eugene had heard it all and often, that he was a selfish, indifferent, preeminently stingy, and hateful little herbert with fluffy kernels of white hair who was not merely unconcerned to be in her life anymore but a person pretty much intent upon ruining it. Eugene seriously began to pity her. Heartily. What about that resolve about Laura he had made—his epiphany—in the deserts of Nevada? He had to put it aside. He didn't care. He thought of Laura's father repudiating her. She was his illegitimate child in a very real sense. What is a man like, he wondered, who sires then repudiates a child, denies it, irresponsibly brings it into the world and then with loutish indifference and scheming heedlessness throws it away? His own hateful and self-absorbed brother Marsyas and his unscrupulous second wife had done such a thing, adopting three children until they found each of them disappointing as they grew up and then virtually walking away, deserting them as if they were on an empty beach or in a doorway. What kind of trolls can do such a thing? Why was he who asked the question any better than those he asked it of? It crossed Eugene's mind that Laura actually wanted what she would not give herself and, sabotaging her own dreams, sought out losers in her life solely to create problems for him out of revenge against her father. Wasn't hers a Laius complex, excessive domination by an adult? How, he asked himself, could he not pity her? Did glaring defects make a person deficient as missing parts repudiate a whole? But aren't all one? Didn't Buddhism teach us that all phenomena were fundamentally one and interchangeable? Aren't thirty spokes made one by the holes of a hub? Hadn't a drugged sleep been forced upon her?

"What's this?" asked Laura one morning when at breakfast—Eugene had been up early and taken a walk—he gave her a flower. "It's a delphinium, Marilyn Monroe's second favorite flower. I was going to give you one back at that motel in Paso Robles, the Clifton, but you

were so annoyed, so amped, screaming imprecations against your father, that I thought it—I don't know—inappropriate at the time."

"I don't know what to say."

He waited. *Just say thanks.*

She set the flower aside.

"You have mad dreams."

"I have mad memories," Laura said, straightening a few long grey wisps falling across her long nose. It was as if she were making a confession, waiting to express only once again, divulge, what she had a thousand times before. As she spoke, it was an odd phenomenon that her ears, jutting out so, actually seemed themselves to be listening. How she despised that man! While he never forgave his daughter for the years she had wasted and for more than a decade of feckless behavior, which clearly implicated him, she condemned him for the reckless disregard that she insisted had caused it. She even went so far as to loath his pronunciations: "'Breftest,' he'd say for breakfast, can you believe it?" Then the thunder cracked in Ohio. "I've . . . I've never told you something," said Laura. She paused, nervously, as they drove along the highway. Pitilessness turned her face into a cold mask, and, strangely, in the intervening silence her ears seemed to jut out even more. She was wearing a necklace of blue glass beads and a brown sweater. She looked good only in brown, as people with brown hair tend to do. Her eyes, intense, peering from beneath a thatch of heavy bangs, had a persecuted quality. Suddenly Laura turned abruptly and said, "I don't know how to say this. You wouldn't either. My father . . . molested me when I was little. I think I was four or five. In my bedroom." She drew a breath. "Last Christmas when I went home, I was standing in the kitchen and"—she sat backwards in the car and swerved to the side, acting it out in a dumbshow—"reaching past me, I swear to God, he placed his right hand on my groin, a, like, totally unnecessary maneuver or don't you happen to agree? Right there in the morning, the weird fuck." She chewed her lip. "Talk about inappropriate!" She rolled down the window. "I dream of burning his house down with him in it!"

When she told him all of this, his heart leapt out of him, hit the wall, and came back. What to believe, what not? Was this another sign of chronic depression and memory? Had she confused by some sort of mad chiasmus her father and Warholic? Was she cyclothymic as she once claimed she was, he wondered, open to mood-swings that fell

just short of full-blown psychoses? Was it behind her incessant need and the application and re-application of favors asked in the way she worked like a drip-feed? The ravening unreason of her overheated demands? The explanation of someone who had always refused to believe that spirituality could be terrifying, a fact that was far and away more terrifying? The unbudging refusal to recognize her own bad behavior and to accept its consequences? The compulsive table-turning by which conveniently and repeatedly she blamed everyone else—her mother, father, ex-lovers, friends and acquaintances, ex-roommates—for her own crimes, misdemeanors, abortions, failures, lack of savings, repeated affairs, empty vows, whatever? Ms. Bergkeller! Was she bipolar? He thought of pianist Anton Rubinstein who refused to play in only two countries: Tibet because it was too high and Germany because it was too low! Ms. Kellerberg! Her father had hurt her. She had hurt her father. Who—which of them—had progressed beyond it? Didn't Saint Paul speak of "a worldly grief that does not lead to repentance"? The previous April or May, on particular days that they were not getting along, he found her almost certifiably insane. Springtime is supposedly the worst time for bipolars and such depressives, he had read, but what season was excluded, what day unreckoned, what dark hour not seriously watched for a person through whose heart ran a jagged and disfiguring gletz, a fatal crack never to be mended?

After Laura claimed that Warholic might have given her AIDS, Eyestones realized in a final melancholy way that he had been fobbed off with only another tall tale, a crowning one, as she would have it, and the one that she swore was true. Eugene said, "You told me he was impotent." "He is." "And he gave you—?" "I said *might* have," declared Laura, her eyes flashing fury. "And not from fucking. What that creep wanted in bed was—"

"OK, OK, OK, OK, OK."

"He was in my face big-time. And I was like no way. So why are you having an expression?"

Eyestones knew that the one person that rapists, bombers, and serial killers most hold a grudge against—father, boyfriend, boss—was almost always the last person they could bring themselves to confront.

But now it was not her father.

It was herself.

XXXII
The Disadvantages of You

Although Eugene had noticed after only a few days in her company that Laura Warholic was not only a woman with a grievance—for him, for past acquaintances of hers, for most men—but possibly the most negative person he had ever known, he knew that his own blunder in staying with her or at least remaining by her side for several years constituted a certain turpitude and signified no less a failure. Twoness constituted wavilinear relatedness, or should, did it not? he asked himself. But they had their response, or lack of one, in the continuous and dazed confusion of what they both refused to hear. "With us there's nothing to be sure of," she said in a sentence that in its presumptive lilt almost had a melody to it. But he replied with a pleading and almost industrious concern, "But I'm *not* with you." It was as if they had been brought artificially together like wood and iron which made an axe solely by virtue of their conjunction, and yet the independent nature of the two materials, while maintaining a full identity as part of the implement or tool respectively, never joined well.

Any feelings he might have had at the beginning—momentarily swapped—were unthinkably brief. They spent time together thereafter with clouded and unexamined hearts, and it was only because he pitied her. All the mistrust of mind that she generated in him forbade any intimacy of body. She was not only but substantially a form surrounded by space, rather like an art model to a serious and attentive

painter, and regarding the laws of such a relationship it followed that whatever view he took of her, and he took many, from different angles, and there were many of those, was therefore true. While he had no physical interest in her, he saw that it was an estrangement, an oddly appropriating estrangement, that was due however less to a physical thing than the fact that she was neither honest nor committed to him or in fact to anything. Not even to herself. And he was no better. To whom however was he himself honest? Committed? There is no snare like self-delusion, he thought. A great part of her self-delusion was her galvanizing presupposition about him from the first about his unavailability, in spite of his candor to the contrary. He was always fleeing her in ways that mattered. She was constantly on her dromocycle. But, again, he thought, what had he in fact produced to help her? To ease her life in any way significant? No, he decided, face answered face in the glass. He wanted to believe he tried to listen to her and to help whenever she needed him, and if he was never sure of who she was or what it was she wanted, his hope, scaffolding space, was only that she would eventually find her way. But it was not only his help she sought. Like a bat, she literally de-pended everywhere. It was as if by some sort of magical, magnetic chemotaxis she presumed on the care of anyone she could find. But how can someone be missing if no one is looking for you?

America, which worships only the most obvious forms of success, which is to say having money, was in a very real way the worst place for her, even more than it was for him, who so often felt marginalized and even when committed, committed to an infinity of dead ends, for here she was an outlaw, ignored and overlooked and consigned day after day to the nullifying kinds of sonorous oblivion awaiting such people and mocked the very rules and in the very game from which she was excluded, except of course in the violent ways that a sociopathic republic with corrupt ease aids and accommodates, indeed often fosters extremes in the terrible paralysis of non-identity and fatal uprootedness. So much had shaped her personality both from what she felt had not been given her and what she felt had been taken away which while entirely different things eventuated in the same immobilizing lack of crescendo. Nevertheless, Eyestones was concerned in the light of her having seen so many other men that she might have contracted diseases, as she herself feared, for she was constantly alluding to her former lovers and ex-boyfriends and, assembling facts on the

fly, cranking out anecdotes by way of a mental algorithm that seemed maddeningly endless. How odd, he thought, in such a syphilophobe to avoid doctors, until he realized that is exactly what syphilophobes *do*! Her bowleggedness and that listing shipboard gait of hers, as well as the long socks and T-shirts she wore to bed most of the time he stayed over, were an added anaphrodisiac, as were her poultry-feet eyes, surprisingly wrinkled even at the age of thirty-five. Eyestones reflected that what attracted him may have always been corrupt and possibly corrosive. "Spoon me," she would cry in bed on a cold night or in a needful mood, which vexed him some for she was not only unhygienic but a "scream geek" in moments of extreme anxiety as he had seen on their long trip, and, in the extreme, dangerous of mind, at least in his opinion, if not on her way to the rubber room. She was unattractively bumless—pairs of panties she wore always incongruously puffed out in the rear, empty as air—and pipecleaner-thin, on top of it all, and no one could deny it. She was not merely slender, but "flying thin," as meat-cutters say regarding meat sliced thin enough to read through. The ugly birthmark the size of a dime, hairy and black, that sprouted on the left side of her clavicle had from the first time he knew her been a refrigerant to him. Laura missed any kind of prettiness not simply because she was too thin—not cigarette-slim, but bonily unattractive and knuckle-knocking—but also because the cosmetics on her face were far too lavishly and unskillfully applied. Feeling uncharitable hurt him. But there was no hope for it. She had been poorly made, like an undercooked ceramic, a long drawn scrawniness adhibiting to her like an exoskeleton, a kind of fixed repellent chitin with little meaning and not a sign of grace. Intimacy for someone he did not love became impossible. And he hated himself for it.

If being in love is loving the chance to be able to love, did not being in love allow for the cruelty not only of observation but of dismissing another like dirt? Ridicule is the nexus of nightmares.

Still, whenever she asked, he would hold her, enfold her in his arms. She was a soda straw. She reminded him in her wobbling thinness of a *don ganh*, the Vietnamese carrying-pole balanced on the shoulder to transport goods. Her skin with its odd texture had the feel of pebble-dash-siding and the look of Andrew Wyeth-wood, dry and grainy and boardy and hard, a landscape of bleak winter with no sign of blossoms. Shouldn't women with large mouths somehow be taught not to carry bright lipstick colors to the very corners of their mouths? He could

not feel for someone he felt such pity for. Hadn't E. M. Cioran scrupulously warned us, "The flesh is incompatible with charity: orgasm transforms the saint into a wolf"? But there was sex-flesh and need in her, and her need drove her bones, which were pushing at her skin, making her narrow shoulders rise in two pagoda-like points. For all her confused, broken-hearted, compromised, exploited, and exploiting past, however, Eyestones could not help at such times but reflect on her renegade and unloving family that she herself now embodied, and how whenever leaving him she never once looked back to wave, when, say, boarding a bus or disembarking at an airport, when it was *precisely* at such significant places—comings and goings—that dramatic and romantic dreams played out. The loving impulse! Such passionate meetings. Such intense goodbyes, meetings matchless for passion and intensity! The desperate way lovers meet or weep on the run, clutch and claw each other with such pulsating, driving, uncompromising desire! How often at airports had he seen and felt or missed and wished for this spectacle of love!

He closed his eyes. A face from the past, a past he never let go, softly returned in the mist of memory to smile at him again, a girl named Nguyen Thi Ba, whom they called Tuyet, which means Snow. Brave. Kind. Who *dared* to love, to dream it, to know it, to say it in the midst of war-flame and brutal walls of fire and black disintegration "What hovers in the air like butterflies? What croaks under foot like frogs?" she would ask him, laughingly posing a riddle. "Snow!" The Vietnamese do not kiss in public, but, much more erotically, women know how to hug their boyfriends tightly from behind. He remembered one night in an old abandoned annex of the old Hotel Sofitel Metropole Hanoi on Ngo Quyen Street how they made love. Her soft, gentle movements and asparagus-tip fingers. Her delicate ophir earrings. Her mouth-to-mouth whispers in the middle of the night, her kisses in the morning, her hands around his waist. The steaming bowl of *pho* they shared in tiny bistros down long dark alleys, the *cha ca*, the *nem nuona*, the *chao tom*, grilled shrimp sticks of sugarcane. "You don't eat the stick," she would say, laughing. "Maybe chew it for the juice." Their endless walks. The way every goodbye brought an ache to his heart, her soul, their love. There were so many sounds that made so little sense in the silences of night, except their souls. And now she was gone. Tears filled his throat as he held Laura but missed Snow. Happiness is wanting to be nobody. Happiness is wanting to be nobody. . . .

"I'm going grey," said Laura, plucking out a white strand of hair. "The average woman loses fifty to a hundred strands of hair a day. No big thing," replied Eugene, shrugging. She complained as well about getting older and of not having many of the things other women of her age had. One of the things he *had* liked about her was that she was not one of those narcissistic, because-I'm-worth-it, fashion-accessory whores. Was that changing, too? Nothing transfigures the face more than resentment, he saw, but he was only half-listening. Once you are thoroughly wet, you no longer feel the rain. He remembered in the desolate outback of Phong Dien and Quangtri how in her intrepidness sweet Snow had never complained. He felt the gloom. Wasn't it Dante who pointed out the irony that no sadness is greater than when in misery to rehearse memories of joy? "I am worried about a small growth . . . thing," said Laura, exposing the flatness of her right breast and indicating a tiny white macula on the aureole that she feared was a sarcoma. "It hasn't gone away," she said. "I'll take you to a doctor in the morning, if you'd like—now if you want," said Eugene. But she flatly refused. The turpitude in the matter that he at first ascribed to her was upon examination actually fear, the real terror of having herself tested. A true and experienced hypochondriac, she had effectively put paid to a possible romance between them at the start of their relationship when, one Sunday afternoon as Eugene was driving Laura back to Newburyport from Boston after only a few months of knowing her, she brought up a subject that became central and completely deleterious to any kind of peace or contentment they might have had between them. "Back in San Francisco? When Warholic and I were living together? After a while he was using Caverjet, but he refused to use a condom." She paused to shake her head. "I should never have allowed that," she said, pouting, slouching back in the car seat. "After the filthy places he frequented? The people? The whores? Strippers? I don't think so." Eugene, in whose mind was suddenly raised by way of recollection the specter of jungle lust in Vietnam and soldiers with abraded and gnawing outrage who suffered from the Black Rose of Calcutta, a horrible venereal disease, or the hammerhead clap, microbes with claws in the testicles, turned to Laura with something like alarm. "*You haven't taken a blood test yet*?" he asked, completely incredulous.

Laura shook her head negatively.

"But why?"

She was scowling. "Take a chill pill," she said. "I should have taken a blood test, OK? I just didn't."

Discknickers had been correct, thought Eyestones, about his wayward attempts with Laura when he accused her of one count of Title 26, U.S. Code, Section 5861.

Illegally possessing a destructive device.

A bomb.

"You should have," he said, pressing the foot pedal, an organist pushing his darkest note. "You know that, don't you? You really should have." Was she listening? "Laura?"

Her face was inexpressive as a football. "Yes, Dad," she pronounced coldly, "I should have. I really should have, *DAD!*"

In the dark, Eugene recalled how at his apartment, over a period of time, because Laura never took the time to care, she had inadvertently smashed his coffee pot, broke his bathtub faucet, impatiently snapped the knob off his hot-water heater, and destroyed the remote of his TV by falling asleep with it in her hands—she had to have noise when she was falling asleep—when it dropped and broke into smithereens. She could not sew or clean or cook. She needed a recipe to make ice cubes. Eugene thought of the long, semi-psychotic story that Mutrux, with a captured audience, retailed in the diner that night with such plodding analysis, metronomic detail, and hoary authority. He remembered he told him that one time back in San Francisco, trying to make a cake from scratch, Laura did not know that beaters went into an electrical eggbeater and had actually immersed the machine *itself* into the batter in order to mix it! "I baked some beans," she announced one night in Eugene's small kitchen, but the navy beans were undercooked, hard as BBs, lacking spices, and tasted as bland and unexceptional as Universalist Unitarian doctrine! When eating, she habitually sat away from a table, askew and slovenly, and had the awful habit when opening a new packet of sugar of using only half a portion, then tucking the unused half away, merely folded, whereupon all the sugar for the next user spilled out everywhere. She never bothered to feed the cat, Nook, but only served herself. "O perverse sex where none is true but she / Who's therefore true because her truth kills me," thought Eyestones, recalling John Donne in the attitude of a Petrarchan wooer speaking to fair but obdurate Laura, whom the poet reproaches, not for fickleness, noted Eugene, but for too impeccable a coldness. Month after month after month, Laura invited herself to his rooms and stayed for

weekends, where on a couch she sat, jobless of a Sunday, poring over the "Help Wanted" section of the *Boston Globe* highlighting various entries with a yellow magic marker and cluck-clucking about her bad luck while he would try to ignore her, listening to old records, things like "Papa" Charlie Johnson's "All I Want Is a Spoonful," Jinx Blues's "Twa Twa Twa Blues," Blind Lemon Jefferson's "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean," Blind Blake's "Dry Bone Shuffle," Iva Smith's "Barrel House Mojo," and Sharlie English's "Tuba Lawdy Blues." One night, in a roach motel in Newark, New Jersey, on one of the last nights on their trip, when he was defending himself against one of her hysterical accusations that he was unfaithful, as he had not been, she put her foot wrong in a demented tirade and out of a particular jealousy mentioned a woman named Kate. Fidelity, he had always believed, was the only bearable form of chastity, but how proofs weary the truth when you have to insist on it.

Her improbable presumption that he was hers on any level gave way to the more alarming assumption of a familiarity she obviously felt was her just due.

"What's this about Kate?"

"Or whoever."

"Not whoever," he said. "You mentioned her."

"It's like so not interesting."

"My *typist*? How do you know about her?"

She peered timidly over the blanket. An opossum's face, long snout, wide mouth, suddenly dared not look, although it had to, but these were the gleaming eyes of guilt. She grew afraid. She had been caught red-handed by way of her big mouth. She turned her head to the wall. Eyestones felt a terrible headache and taking off one pair of glasses put on his green spectacles, which he thought might ease the throb and improve his shortsightedness. He pressed his throbbing temples tightly. He whispered, "You went and read my mail?"

She held her breath.

"Why not fold your arms?" asked Eugene.

"Why?"

"You always do when you lie." She began to cry.

What self-delusion, Eyestones reflected. What does a person seek to confirm by such spying, but trace her own spoor back to her own deceit? Whenever they went to the beach, as they had on several Sundays, tired of chevroning an arm over her face against the white hot

sun, she could never disguise the emerging grin as she lay there in the grip of actirastic lust for what she called "stud muffins" and "snacks"—"Skateboard pants has a beer can," she would lewdly coo, or "I like the snack at three o'clock in those brick-high rubber thongs," or "What does that big pepper-mill remind you of?"—invariably cocking her eyes to some lost point on the horizon whenever her partner on the same blanket inquired how jealous she would be if he were making the same comments about women. People who make a fetish of alienation, who keep all relationships temporary by their victimhood, never seem to realize such things.

"You went through my desk?"

"*No!*" she said.

He thought she was only frightened into her lies and protected herself by going deaf, folding herself into a sandwich-like hover. A lie has a body.

"I'm sorry," Laura then sobbed. "I guess I have no character."

There are a lot of things you haven't got, he thought, who seeing her tears was fully aware of her idiosyncrasy for magnifying the minute. *And I am one of them.*

She pulled the covers over her head. There was only a mountain of big dead hair sticking out. "I'm jealous," she muttered from underneath. "I'm crazy. I'm an emotional sponge. I don't deserve to be with anyone who's human." She occasionally had these bouts right out of a Russian novel of confession and abasement and humility, the flipside of her bonafide aggression. Bergkeller! But they broke his heart. "I'm a fool. I lie I cheat. I'm the worst person in the world."

He took off his glasses to wipe his eyes. "If I ask you another question, Laura, will you give me a direct answer and tell the truth?"

Peering out of the blankets seemed to lengthen her nose, giving her the look of a Venetian carnival mask. He turned to avoid directly looking at her.

"Did you ever"—he was almost embarrassed to ask it—"slash a painting at the MFA?"

She seemed to hang fire.

She then shot straight up on a bounce into a sitting position, her hair raddled and sprung out filament-like, like the flaring tree on the Connecticut State quarter, and with crossed eyes howled for the entire neighborhood to hear, "*I am fucking worthless! I am fucking worthless! I am fucking worthless!*"

Laura Shqumb, certifiably insane.

Eugene went outside and sat on the steps under a pewter grey sky. It was the second time that Laura had done that, opening his desk and filtering through his private papers, letters, phonebook, trying to find anything she could use either to blame or indict him for what she began taking as his indifference, paradoxically failing to understand that his growing inertia toward her grew precisely from such bad behavior. The person he once cared for and tried to help, he now saw, though he hated to see, was nothing but a nosy busybody craftier than a wagonload of motors, who with snooping ingenuity and oblivion for a heart ironically refused the very reality she needed to control in order to cope. Clouds formed overhead like despoliations. Was she worthless? Not that. Never. No one is. Was she merely troubled? Indeed, she was. But it was worse than that. Was she a shape-changing and unaccountable confounder of hope and in a real sense insane? It was possible. Yet it was as if her screams of madness in the midst of her suffering, this *crise de nerf,* held enough of humility for him to find in her something of vincible worth. Because of her irrationality? Perhaps. It seemed in the end, however, that he was always at that point where he would have missed its disappearance more than its presence inconvenienced him. The question remained, nevertheless, what did that say about him? *I hate to say this*, echoed Duxbak's voice, *but don't you see you're with her because you feel a failure?*

The balancing pole! *Don ganh.* And I am the balancer, he concluded. For wasn't that also the way with *me*, Eyestones reflected, using manipulation by self-abasement in the way she does, the way a scream alleviates pain? Wasn't that the way with us all, choosing half and half, ultimately striving to get the benefit of both? What picture of each other had either of them drawn that was correct? And was it fair? A left-hander always almost always draws a right-faced profile, just as a right-hander does a left. Vision is a barricade. Skewed. Irresponsible.

Eyestones had always suspected that the one who knows the most carried the responsibility. Burdens go to the strongest. He had been taught, perhaps irrationally, that no matter what, one tried to find something to love in a person, like a social worker in the midst of criminal lives. Who was it that said certainties are arrived at only on foot? He felt her his, as if she had been given him to deal with and to husband through. She had loved him once, in her way, yes, he believed that; if nothing else, hadn't that alone attracted him to her in a flounce

of his own vanity, as it did the love objects of those callow and confessing roués as exampled, say, in the neurasthenic pages of the decadent Choderlos de Laclos in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*: "The perfect happiness she enjoyed in being loved by me really attaches me to her." Eyestones considered that he had more than once been oddly converted to ideas that he had begun by attacking. He who wanted no unhappiness of his own to blind him to the pain of others often had terrible dreams of Laura kneeling down in front of an oncoming train. How the forgotten can feel like the unknown! Wasn't that why in the face of all logic that she, as if to woo him, still went through the formality of buying her father Christmas presents, even if they proved to be nothing more than things like commercial budget calendars, thrift-shop scarves, cheap splits of wine, neckties that looked like slotted spoons, bulk hankies, "Pocket Pal" all-purpose wrenches, or, if she was experiencing a bout of high munificence, holiday medleys in festive fruit-tins of year-old petit-fours? At yard sales she would buy things for her mother for dimes and quarters like a Chia Pet, the Clapper, or a SaladShooter, sometimes a cheese log, a Dustbuster, or a poinsettia, the fruitcake of flowers. It was rare for Laura to purchase anything of substance for her parents, and she usually regifted items, sending them, often belatedly, months later, books, ties, and other small things that Eyestones had given her. Although he was merely guessing, he began to believe with lengthening retrospection that those episodes of hysteria of hers, followed by sudden self-control, were indicative of severe or at least chronic mental illness. She looked in extremis the way a leptosome does, quite unstrung and memoryless and at times leaving an odor of Dowicide.

Was that why he stayed by her? He wasn't sure he knew why he did so himself. Was it her unhealth? That hysterical anxiety attack that she said she suffered at fourteen when she went blind as a Greenland shark? Her fear of getting epiglottis and finding her throat closed? Had he been mistaken in his conviction, a positive one, that adversity often introduces a person to oneself? Out of concern, he tried to support her. He gave her rides, dropped her off, lent her money, helped her move several times from flat to flat. Why let the perfect be the enemy of good, he wondered. If it was not good, was it so bad? Wasn't there a psychological law that compels a man who commits actions under duress to supply in the fever of his searching and desperate imagination a whole series of retrospective reflections to prove his freedom to him-

self? Where is blame ultimately to be laid anyway in the transgressor? Who is ever fully responsible for a crime? Isn't the thief only a poor soul who merely follows the thought that occurs to him in a subjective impulse born of an idea hard-wired to the way he or she is brought up and his wish if wayward only a want of wisdom? Had he not always been too impatient with Laura? Don't crows eat corn extensively only when it has been softened by germination or by partial decay or before it is ripe and still "in the milk"? Laura was desperate. She was dependent. He felt she *needed* him. When he had met her, she had not seen a dentist or had her teeth cleaned or visited an optometrist or had an eye exam in years. Apparently, she had not bothered to get a physical exam from a doctor, although she had had two abortions. He made appointments for her for dental work, she ordered eyeglasses she badly needed, but she flatly refused to see a physician for fear of AIDS. She was unhygienic and on several occasions nut-sized lumps of wax-buildup in her ears had to be surgically extracted. She shared her mother's soaring hypochondria and with unending flux and wonder would sit up by a bulb-light into the wee hours of the morning and read every single book she could find on Prozac, Kerlone, and Zoloft. "I have ADHD—adult deficit hypersensitivity," she once told him seriously, making him wonder if he should not begin keeping a running file of her indispositions like blank dog-license tags or open-building permits. Once again he saw that she was a simplicity-junkie, open to every new nostrum, a lightning-rod for herbalista, homeopaths, karma culture, aura photography, dimension-compatibility charts, yoga-faith, all sorts of ayurvedic mumbo-jumbo, and because, more than anything, she believed she was chronically depressed, which of course only continued to help make her so, she was constantly taking things like bee pollen, Coenzyme Q-10, selenium, lithium, Saint-John's-wort, Siberian ginseng, ginkgo biloba, pregnenolone, chromium picolonate, yohimbe extract, and things like hawthorn berries and black cohosh? What was she looking to cure? Don't Taoists tell us that human beings are too malleable to have a specific nature? How is a nature formed? Is it only one nature? And what does a nature face? Are shell and snail separable? Even if Laura did read his mail, curse her father, diss her friends, habitually lie about her affairs, and go off in a thousand pointless directions, it was her, wasn't it? The geography of fragility. Love is an enigma. It turns and turns and turns again. Wasn't that why Venus is the only planet that rotates clockwise?

Why is it assumed—presumed—as we pass through our small insignificant lives with the faces and bodies and names assigned us that we all can cope? It touched on something that had bothered Eyestones ever since he was a small boy. How can any of us manage by any ostensive definition to live a rational life in such a disparate world and try to comprehend or connect, with anything like focus, thoughts of God and the fact of our birth and the identity of our parents and the significance of our address and the crisis of bedwetting and the complexity of our dreams and the study of fractions and our relations to siblings and the scent of Christmas trees and the meaning of faraway mountains and the beauty of spring and the turn of seasons and the study of Egyptian hieroglyphs and the ascent of Kanchenjunga and singing the *Te Deum Laudamus* and facing cruelty and watching one's father die and falling in love in Johnson, Vermont and listening to Jules Massenet's *Hérodiade* and Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* in E Flat in any conclusive way? It was all of it a world we did not make but *inherited*! Eyestones thought of that Mozart piece in which the composer had specifically tuned the violin strings a semitone higher. It was called "scordatura" tuning. Hadn't he used Laura that way? If he himself had not deliberately mistuned the strings, had he not nevertheless, like Paganini, fixed that finally as a mode of playing her?

Who can ever proceed and by whose perception? Who can know of what is to know? Where on earth is the beginning of how to study of what to solve and where to solve it? What are the truths to assemble of how to cope? Mustn't we all experience in a deep, personal climb-down—and didn't Einstein tell us that gravity weakens over distance?—that there is a theoretical limit to the accuracy with which certain connected quantities can be known, never mind simultaneously measured as to our own sense of place, position, momentum, energy, and time? Why is it that—and who indeed can assure us that—what may and must be, is? He felt like a rascally didactitian, in the pomposity of his posturing questions flying in the face of Galatians and falsely adding to the message of grace the shrill regulations of the law.

Eugene was suddenly overcome with a great pity for Laura Warholic. Emotion has a logic incomprehensible to reason. What reason? Whose logic? He who when he was with her so often sought to maintain a separate and distinct skein of hope apart from her, like the spirit line in a Navajo rug running, winding, out of the work as an expression of freedom, now thought wistfully of how helpless but kind she could

be at times. Winningly hapless, if blinkered. At times even endearingly muddled. Laura had once bought for him what she thought were packets of 45 rpm records when they turned out to be sanding wheels, metal-cutting wheels with grit numbers, carbide hook and loops! What once seemed insane now seemed endearing. A wave of regret mixing with almost heart-stopping compassion took hold of him as he pitifully regarded this figure thin as the fish-bone petroglyphs on cave paintings out west, all the while wondering exactly how he should care for and interpret her, faced as he always seemed to be with the baffling wish to make solid plans for his "friend and enemy," this coupled with the certainty that it would all lead nowhere. He recalled feeling this way another time, after she told him about her father's indifference—he had been playing Fauré's *Elegie* and it went straight to the crying zone—how he had wanted to put his arms around her non-feature-laden body and kiss her unergometric hands. He wondered, may not the phrase "I love you, please don't fear" be declared by one person, in all honesty, to many, since one person *is* indeed many, even if not all at once? Opposites are one, he thought. Freud's darkest truism. What is my new desert? he wondered, remembering he once read the phrase in one of Thomas Merton's books. The name of it is compassion. "There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and so fruitful," wrote Merton, "as the wilderness of compassion." Eugene thought he understood. It is what is asked of us by *sacrifice*. Wasn't the act of love actually measured by what one was willing to sacrifice and why? He thought of Duxbak who believed that trouble was part of life to accentuate happiness. Oh, Lord, if you mark iniquities, who shall stand? asked the Psalmist. Eugene sadly saw that his dreams allowed for no happiness. Paradise is an imaginary location. No map exists for perfection. Where utopianism fails when asking for the perfectible it seeks the impossible. A good part of being happy is knowing simply how to abide with people, the way they are, and with yourself, the way you are, was it not? Eugene stood up and went back in to the motel room. Laura was lying face-down on the dark bed completely covered in a blanket, head to toe, like a dead bundle. Strange sounds, sobbing sounds, emanated from her that truly had no top or bottom. There was nothing he could do but lie down beside her, take her hand, and try to make her feel that she was not alone. Didn't Herodotus write that all good ideas come out of the desert? She felt unenticingly hot to the touch and humid and smelt rubbery. Scent is the sister of breath.

He whispered out her name. As he held her head against his chest, her tears poured over his hands, which alone made something in him love her.

"Say a prayer," he said softly.

"What should I say?"

"'There are four corners to my bed, / Four angels round my head. / Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, / God bless the bed that I lie on."

He held her in his arms until she stopped crying. "'Ottim an' the livs is fallin,'" quoted Eugene softly, gently whispering to her and wiping her tears. "What's that?" she asked with rain in her voice. "It's from Krazy Kat," he said. She looked blank. "It's a cartoon. A George Herriman comic. That's OK. It's not important." He pushed back her hair. His voice felt so weak he wondered if he was going to cry.

"Fold your hands—"

"I know," said Laura, sniffling up her tears, "and say a prayer to Saint Pretzel."

XXXIII

What in Love or Sex Isn't Odd?

What in love or sex wasn't odd? Eugene thought, as he sat there next to Laura, figuratively walking across history's foot-beaten stones. He reflected that sex in its manifestations, its appearances, its concavities and convexities, showed the human species—always—to be at its most extreme, most mysterious, most inexplicable, most embarrassing, most challenging, certainly most revealing, and most definitely at its oddest! La Gioconda in DaVinci's *Mona Lisa* has no eyebrows. There are both male and female eggplants. Iranian women cannot wear nail polish or varnished nails of any kind, but perfume is encouraged at prayer time. The Spanish word *esposa* means both "wife" and "handcuffs." Jane Austen considered that two people without means should never marry. All native women in Lae, New Guinea, are called Mary. Aristotle believed that girls were conceived in cold weather, boys in warm. At the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, the winners weep and the losers smile. Anne Jarvis, the creator of Mother's Day, never became a mother herself. Lesbian Carson McCullers married a gay man. Venus de Milo's navel became the pattern for tortellini. The only way to tell a male penguin from a female penguin is by autopsy. Ishtar was both a mother *and* a prostitute. Australian aborigines, who usually go about totally naked and are unconcerned if a stranger sees them defecating, are nevertheless deeply ashamed to be seen eating. It was one of gay poet Walt Whitman's fantasies that he had a black

mistress. Sexpot Jayne Mansfield attended both SMU and UCLA and got As in philosophy courses. The famous sex therapist Havelock Ellis strenuously claimed that he had written definitively on the subject of pissing. Cary Grant had a predilection for wearing women's tights all the time. Schopenhauer said that if women did not have a unique anatomy, there would be a bounty on them. At the time Marie Stopes wrote *Married Love*, her pioneer manual on sex and contraception, she was both a virgin and a divorcée. The word *penis* comes from the Latin word for *tail*.

Mistletoe, symbol of love, is poisonous. George Orwell believed that the handshake is an unhygienic act. Only the first two inches of the vagina have nerve endings, plus the average female canal is only five inches, so why would a large penis matter? Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey always unabashedly burst into tears while watching the British film, *Quartet* (1948), indifferent to whether anyone with him noticed. Vincent van Gogh scrupulously smeared his bedclothes with camphor to prevent wet dreams. Saint Thomas Aquinas thought that sex was immoral unless the man was on top, and that using a contraceptive was worse than incest. Hugh Hefner through his entire life has not had a continuous successful relationship with a woman although he has been giving advice on the subject for more than half a century. The Sumerian gesture of copulation involving fertility—the right thumb encircled by the thumb and index finger of the left hand—was the prototype of the steepled hand-gesture of the Far East (*wai*) and the gesture of Christian prayer. The Bible expressly states that Moses, the great Hebrew lawgiver, refused to allow himself to be circumcised (Exodus 4:25), which was an Egyptian custom in the first place. Geishas, in order to be successfully accepted everywhere, are taught from the age of nine to be charming, not only to men, but to other *women*. Actress Jennifer Tilly always buys a new mattress every time she gets a new boyfriend. Aristotle Onassis liked to lick a woman between the toes, carefully, like a cat. Transsexuals are, in the main, hugely sexless. Giovanni Jacopo Casanova, who fell in love with Leonilda, his daughter by a woman, Lucrezia, with whom he had enjoyed copulating marathons seventeen years earlier, once said, "I have never been able to understand how a father could tenderly love his charming daughter without having slept with her at least once." Biographer James Boswell whenever he rutted always wore "armour," condoms made of dried animal intestines. Expressionistic dancer Isadora Duncan always referred to her bed as

"God." Whenever W. H. Auden headed into a dark tunnel by car, the poet always muttered, "Hello, mother."

God commanded the prophet Hosea to marry a whore. Is sex humorless? Film director Max Sennett said, "When you put the bathing beauties in a movie, people stopped laughing and comedy stopped." Sparrows do not live long because of their salacity. Novelist Ayn Rand, a short, dark, homely Jewess for whom a man's desirability alone reflected his superior mind and character—mind makes a person physically desirable, in short— once declared, "There is no conflict between the standards of his mind and the desires of his body." Gustave Flaubert was fascinated by the coitus of peacocks. Acquisition, not sex, is considered to be the principle vice of women after the age of thirty; the act of shoplifting is beyond all others mainly a woman's crime. Actress Katharine Hepburn asserted in a television interview in 1973 that never once in her life had a man ever made a pass at her.

Among the Romans, widows were hated and forbidden to remain unmarried for more than a year. Gertrude Stein declared that being a genius required her to become a man. ("I am very fond of yes sir," she wrote.) The nickname for the sled in the movie *Citizen Kane* was taken from William Randolph Hearst's name for his mistress Marion Davies' clitoris: "Rosebud." Hearst. very much a dictator, curiously loved to see his mistress dominantly dressed in trousers and uniforms. Over 80 percent of women masturbate as a substitute for sex, to relieve migraines, to recharge, to fight insomnia, to beat PMS, to banish worries, to cheer up. In January 1958 Malcolm X's proposal of marriage to Betty Sanders was made by way of a telephone-call from a gas station; two days later they were married in the town of Lansing, Michigan, by a white justice of the peace. Although grail texts are all about masculinity, the grail itself was a feminine image. Memoirist Primo Levi, an industrial chemist, considered love and passion to be the epitome of unstable organic life. Havelock Ellis remained a virgin all his life and felt that it gave him objectivity in his field of endeavor.

The scriptural book of Esther, the first beauty queen and a woman who literally soaked herself with perfume, has *nothing* to do with God, worship, faith, prayer, or sacrifice, only the intrigues of sex. Although Lord Byron, handsome, dashing, well-born, and talented, was legendarily held to be the ultimate romantic, novelist George Sand (born Amandine Dupin)—who slept with many artists, Frédéric Chopin and Alfred de Musset among them—wrote that the poet made love

very badly. The hormone progesterone can be easily extracted from wild yams that grow in the Mexican desert. Nazi commander Reinhard Heydrich, the racist fanatic known as the murdering "Butcher of Prague," was also a rigid and unswerving moralist who declared that any woman who had sex before wedlock was not a worthy wife.

Evangelist Billy Graham never lets himself be alone with a woman, even in an elevator—does he not trust himself with reason or passion? Madame Marie Curie chose her laboratory assistants based on their looks and had sex with them in a bed over which was displayed a picture of her husband, Pierre. Virgins in ancient Egypt wore chainlets attached to both ankles, not only to train them with an elegant stride—*pour régler sa marche*—but also as a method of maintaining their virginity. The most famous sex symbols in American cinema—Jean Harlow, Mae West, and Marilyn Monroe—were childless. Every time a man has sex, he produces enough sperm to impregnate every woman in Europe. Michelangelo Buonnaroti used male models even for the women in his art.

In the Gospels, Nicodemus believed that to be "born again" one actually needed to re-enter the womb. "Girls bore me," the late Walt Disney said. "I love Mickey Mouse more than any woman I have ever known." A bachelor, Henry David Thoreau—who by the way had inordinate mother-love and also celebrated celibacy in his personal life (he probably died a virgin)—actually *loved* trees. "There was a match found for me at last. I fell in love with a shrub oak," he wrote in his *Journal* in 1856, and in *The Maine Woods* said, "I begin to be exhilarated by the sight of the wild fir and the spruce tops."

It was considered lewd in the nineteenth century, when smiling, both to show your teeth and to open your mouth. Feminist Germaine Greer ultimately disclosed that a woman's real sexual liberation was *from* sex. Edgar Allen Poe in marrying thirteen-year-old Virginia ("Sissy") Clemm wedded the daughter of his father's sister. Philosopher Immanuel Kant believed that masturbation, "self-abuse," was worse than suicide. Jean Harlow actually believed a bra was an unhealthy garment. When he was older Bertrand Russell was asked why his concerns turned so dramatically from academic philosophy; he replied, "Because I discovered fucking." The French actress Arletty, who described Greta Garbo as "Beauty itself," added amazingly, "The secret is that she was dumb."

According to Mormon doctrine, all women who are unprovided

with husbands will find the gates of heaven closed to them. It is common, therefore, for Mormon men to wed women even of advanced age to help them reach Paradise, and even marriages by proxy to the dead were also performed as a means of assuring salvation to women no longer living. Broadway producer Florenz Ziegfeld, supposedly an authority on the beauty of showgirls—it was he who established that 36-26-38 was the perfect female shape—actually believed that a woman's *hips* were the most important of the three physical areas. According to reports, novelist Gabriel D'Annunzio supposedly had a rib removed, surgically, the better to be able to bend forward and perform acts of autofellatio.

There is virtually no sex in the "Ten Biggest Grossing Movies of All Time": *Gone with the Wind, Star Wars, E.T., The Ten Commandments, The Sound of Music, Jaws, Dr. Zhivago, The Jungle Book, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and *Ben-Hur*. (In *It Happened One Night,* commonly described as a very sexy film, Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert never even touch hands.) A general truism holds that younger men with lots of brothers tend to become gay. Virginia Woolf—a sexually frigid woman who, according to Vita Sackville-West, never had a grand passion in her life—once declared that "love made everyone a bore." Martial (3:75) believed that bulbs, savory, and rockets provoked lust in people that ate them. Mao Zedong never bathed, saying, "My genitals are washed inside the bodies of my women."

Sir Isaac Newton never had sexual relations with anybody. The water tower in Ypsilanti, Michigan, is shaped like a circumcised penis. Julia Dent Grant, General Ulysses S. Grant's wall-eyed wife, in her letters always referred to her bedpost as "Ulysses" while she was waiting for his return from the Mexican War to get married. Stalin, one of the most notorious architects of cruelty in history, never felt a single emotion after the death of his first wife. In 1913 the erratic Wilhelm Stekel claimed that hate, not love, formed the bonds that held people together.

Introverted and diffident people, according to a UCLA survey, are more susceptible to AIDS and the HIV virus than other people. With bees, the mating of sexes always occurs during the precarious exigencies of flight, always taking place at high altitudes, about fifty feet in the air; mysteriously, drones will *never* mate with a queen flying below a certain height. The drone, incidentally, literally explodes in the act of mating, leaving his sexual organs implanted within the queen's

body, occasionally making the sound of a loud "snap!" Actor Marlon Brando declared that women who refuse to be possessed by husbands always violently and fanatically possess their children.

An Apache son-in-law in an unalterable taboo never speaks to or looks at his mother-in-law. Chimpanzees french-kiss. Seminal fluid alleviates depressive symptoms in the human female. According to Ned Rorem, there is no real literature recounting exploits from the viewpoint of the passive male (the *encule*). Percy Shelley saw eyes instead of nipples in his wife's breasts. A drum scene in the movie *Phantom Lady* (1944) serves as the objective correlative of sex. Why is the penis so often called a "bone" or a "love muscle"? It is a spongy, soft appendage—neither bone nor muscle—that becomes engorged with blood, and no exercise can make it stronger or bigger. (A walrus's penis, an "oosik," does have a long bone in it and is a collectible in the Yukon.) Did the Roman poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus hate women? He never mentions his mother in any one of his writings, and in the *Epodes*, which are bitter and at times disgusting, he describes his discarded sweetheart as making up her complexion with "wet chalk and crocodile dung."

The word *king* is and has always been genderless, and every queen, having become a king, is mistitled unless that specific honorific is applied. What did psychologist Wilhelm Reich believe about lucidity when he wrote, "Clarity is just as serious an illness as promiscuity"? After comedian Stan Laurel's second wife, Virginia Ruth Rogers, had a wisdom tooth extracted—the couple had been married for two years—he lost all interest in her. In Scripture, Adam and Eve not only had Seth as well as Cain and Abel, but Adam—Eve is never mentioned again—sired an additional unspecified number of "sons and daughters."

An autosexual, anyone attracted to being attractive—a person filled with the love of being loved—is completely ignored *as a sex,* when in fact the category may represent an extremely large segment of the population. When Emerson wrote, "Make love a crime and we shall lust," was he commenting on the foolishness of laws or the arbitrariness of love? Was it not odd for Saint Bernard of Clairvaux to assert, "If anyone once receives the spiritual kiss of Christ's mouth, he seeks eagerly to have it again"? Writer Elias Canetti, who had an affair with Iris Murdoch, broke it off by expressing a singular distaste for one aspect, saying, "I could not ignore the ugliness of her feet." Dr. Richard

Selzer believes that it is healthier and far more normal for a woman in the act of childbirth to squat and deliver the baby that way rather than in the patrivincial way of lying down.

French novelist Marcel Proust, in whose pantheon of eroticism evil behavior was eerily inseparable from desire, cruelly stuck rats with hatpins in order to attain an orgasm. In his great masterpiece *Remembrance of Things Past*, Albertine associates the sensation of a smooth male cheek with the moral qualities to be sought in a potential husband whose virtues fade, however, the longer he refrains from shaving. Proust also liked to wear his underwear tight, with safety pins, as if he were in diapers. The modern toilet seat contributes to a sagging bowel and prevents evacuation, robbing us of the natural support to the abdominal walls and colon. African novelist Olive Schreiner, a tiny woman who never got over the savage beatings and whippings her mother dealt her, passionately yearned for lovers of hers to tread on her and stamp her into "fine powder." Bed-wetting is more than anything else an act of angry rebellion.

Aldous Huxley, a philanderer who constantly wrote about sex and whose first wife, Maria, was a lesbian, totally mistrusted the sexual impulse, and nowhere in his novels can be found even the remotest example of a joyous or carefree eros; also, when he was in love, due to some kind of renegade pragmatism or thwarted narcissism, he could never really manage to write a word. A crowd is an enabler: those massive Nazi rallies were mass expressions of the subjugation of the female element for diffident or insecure German males who not only found solace in but took courage from such bonding which at the same time allowed them the triumph of the tough exterior over their soft, hesitant, fluid interior.

In a Manichean version of Genesis, it is Eve who gives life to Adam while the serpent, the Luminous Jesus, is a liberating figure urging the first couple to take the first step toward salvation by partaking from the fruit of the Tree of Gnosis. Surrealist artist Joseph Cornell, a priap fascinated with women whom he pursued all his life, often merely following them for hours through the streets of Manhattan, died a virgin at the age of sixty-nine. Marco Polo wrote that along the caravan routes of China, all husbands and wives who are separated for more than twenty days were free to marry someone else.

Drag kings, women who dress as men, paradoxically attract mainly gay men, *not* straight men who generally find them threatening, in spite

of the fact that most drag kings are often basically parodying gay men and/or gay fantasy men, in the same way that drag queens are often parodying straight women, in many instances by the exaggeration of the strangest-looking of straight women, often tarts, just as gay women with the same need for overemphasis that leads to caricature often dress like the worst of straight men. Why do "drags" never then imitate the best of their opposite sex? By ironically parodying what they do *not* want to be, is it not voguing in reverse, self-repudiation, a confession of failure, an act of humiliation by way of visible contrition?

Married Amish men, who grow beards, a symbol of humility, never grow mustaches, which are considered vain. In Senegal, girls are not allowed to marry until they have borne a child. Fat Elsa Maxwell, the professional international hostess who at parties was always introducing famous men to famous women, always claimed that she never had a single sexual experience, often loudly bloviating, "I am married to the world." Dr. Seuss, who wrote forty-eight children's books, had no children of his own. Why is it that when a man acts foolishly other men say, "What a fool he is," whereas when a woman acts like a fool, men invariably say, "What fools women are"? English aesthete John Ruskin was deeply in love with a nine-year-old girl. Greta Garbo always referred to herself as "he."

Theologically, all angels (seraphim, cherubim, powers, dominations, etc.) are men, never women. Film director Luis Buñuel was repelled by women whose thighs had a noticeable space between them, and he loathed Salvador Dalí's wife, Elena Diakonoff, aka Gala, for that specific reason. Poet Paul Eluard, who was once married to Gala, used to lick her naked photos. Dalí himself, who supposedly had sexual intercourse with his wife only once, was obsessed by the act of sodomy and had been the gay lover of Federico Garcia Lorca. When a man acts badly to all women, does it not usually essentially indicate that he has been burned by only one of them? Clemenceau would always masturbate before arising so he could calmly and quickly get on to the day's more important business.

Marilyn Monroe never used nail polish. The Etruscan word for love—*flucuthukh*—sounds like the act of regurgitation. All sexual intimacy between the sexes of the Australian aborigine occurs during the day and never at night. Philosopher René Descartes had a fetish for women with crossed eyes. Human females are the only creatures that undergo full menstruation. Edward VIII, the Duke of Windsor, was

a repressed foot fetishist whose last recorded murmur was "Mother," a word ironically directed not to his mother, Queen Mary, but to his wife, Wallis Warfield Simpson. In China, most women would never think of shaking hands with a man and are literally horrified to hear that in the West a young man proposing marriage to a woman could possibly be refused. The word nepotism from the Latin *nepos* goes back to the Papal habit during the Renaissance of employing the euphemism "nephew" when placing an illegitimate son or two in the sacred office of cardinal.

Artist Henri Fantin-Latour who feared the opposite sex—"I have little affection for women," he asserted, "they frighten me"—later married dowdy Victoria Dubourg, in spite of the fact that he was secretly in love with her sister Charlotte. Playwright August Strindberg believed that since the act of courtship leads a man inordinately to worship a woman, it gives her the illusion of superiority, the result of which is that, once the illusion disappears and the natural order is reestablished, the sole aim of the woman is to try desperately to pull the man back to the artificial situation of his wooing.

An Arab woman can be divorced for not having a son and often are. Arab mothers, often referred to by their husbands not as a wife but as "the relative in my house" or "the mother of my son, Hussein," have a strong prejudice against curly hair, and according to Lowell Thomas "do everything possible to straighten out any stubborn kinks in a baby's locks." Thomas also points out that it is not the men but the women who in their ferocity keep the century-old blood-feuds alive. Wife-beating is allowed by the Koran. The mathematician and lifelong celibate Paul Erdös whose first love was his mother, told a journalist, "Basically I have a psychological abnormality. I cannot stand sexual pleasure."

According to the Bureau of Statistics, only 20 percent of women insert anything into their vaginas during the act of masturbation. Among the Baciga in Southwest Uganda the bride-to-be sits over a stool and pisses on the stacked hands of the groom and his brothers, who alone, in case of the brother's death, can marry that woman. George Orwell's wife Sonia was having sex with a lover on the night her husband died. Among the Tuaregs of the Algerian desert, tradition has it that men after the age of puberty should veil their faces, while women go barefaced. After reading the works of Shakespeare, Sixties black activist H. Rap Brown summarily dismissed him as a "faggot." Moses was found

to have permanently lost his sexual drive following the forty days he spent in God's presence. Film director John Cassavetes insisted he was interested in only one cinema subject and that was love.

Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, a macrogenitalist in spite of being a dwarf, tended to form servile relationships with women and once told Paul LeClercq, "The body of a woman, the body of a beautiful woman, is not made for love, it is too exquisite." The painter loved women, most especially redheads, particularly their armpits and their armpit odor, which he called "tobacco shops," as well as all of the hidden nooks of their bodies like the insides of their knees and elbows where the skin, as he poetically put it, is "made of living silk which never gets worn." Solitude was seen not only as anti-social but an occasion of sin in the old Pilgrim colony in Massachusetts, and William Brewster, their elder, went out of his way to pass a law prohibiting the act of living alone.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton in *The Woman's Bible* bitched that Jesus Christ was a man who coldly never once visited his mother after the resurrection—nagging that "the first time he speaks to his mother is when he was twelve years old"—and she blamed him as well for his unabating cruelty to Mary Magdalen, "the tenderest and most loving character in the New Testament," who after all that she did for him (washing his feet, standing at the Cross, etc.) was so brutally and unkindly dismissed with his "strangely cold and heartless words" at the sepulcher on morning of his resurrection when he said, "Touch me not."

Comic buffoon Bill Cosby, who wrote the best-selling book *Fatherhood*, not only cheated on his wife but also had an illegitimate child he never publicly acknowledged until she desperately went public with her wayward and indifferent father's neglect. What is the meaning of the bizarre act made by God in Scripture (Numbers 12:10) of turning Miriam into a snowcone? Sigmund Freud considered the male penis to be a legitimate playmate. Georgia O'Keeffe condemned out of hand any criticism of her art that suggested sexual imagery. None of the disciples of Christ ever said a word about his parents; we know nothing of that couple by way of them. "I don't think there is sex in heaven," said the Reverend Billy Graham making one of his apparently prophetic insights into the eternal realm. "If people want to go to heaven to have sex, they'd better have heaven on earth."

Gary Cooper ate a can of sauerkraut each morning because he felt it kept him "regular." (He supposedly never read a single book.) The

compulsion that gay British serial-killer Dennis Nielsen, an ex-butcher, had along with the reason he gave for slaughtering and carving up young men was that he specifically wanted to inspect and to study the hidden area between the anus and the scrotum of the male, an enclosure that posed a great mystery to him. King Solomon had more than one thousand wives, whereas King David had only eighteen: why the generational disparity in Scripture between father and son?

The Koran advises against making love with one's face or buttocks facing Mecca. After holding her for 33 years in concubinage, William Randolph Hearst never once mentioned Marion Davies in his last will. Johnny Weissmuller playing Tarzan the Ape Man in movies was completely hairless of body. In his personal letters composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky never referred to his homosexuality as anything other than "The;" after marrying the incipient nymphomaniac Antonina Ivanovna in the Church of St. George on July 18, 1877—she spent her final years in a mental asylum—he ruefully wrote on his honeymoon, "My wife (this may be unfair) became more abhorrent to me each hour."

Margaret Mitchell, author of *Gone with the Wind*, collected pornographic French postcards and literature with bawdy passages. In the Jewish genetic disease Glucose-6-Phosphate Dehydrogenase Deficiency, the female carries the gene but only produces the disease in her male offspring. Composer Ned Rorem has written that he loathes any odor of the body, perfumed or natural, even that of youth, which he once praised. The famous diarist has also gone on record as saying that the military draft should be instituted only for women and for all men over 40. Catullus in his poem "Life, my Lesbia, live and love forever," introduced a new word for "kiss" into the European languages—"*basium.*" The conventional and commonly accepted word in Latin was the word *osculum.*

After his young lover Chester Kallman spent the night with another man in 1941, poet W. H. Auden tried to throttle him, and in consequence the poet never again slept with him although he lived with him until the day he died in 1973. Sports talk-shows constantly run commercial ads on the indisposition of impotence, erectile dysfunction, and sexual unresponsiveness, surely proving that the American fascination in males for sports—watching them—is, by transferal, quite often a substitute for true potency. Lady Caroline Lamb had buttons specifically made for her clothing stating, "Byron was a scoundrel."

Museum silence is sexual. In the film *Brokeback Mountain*, the homosexual "cowboys" are not cowboys at all, as is commonly repeated, but sheepherders, leading inevitably to the subtext of barnyard carnality, ages old ("Welcome to the West, where men are men, women are women, and the sheep are glad of it" goes an old joke.) Why are the prostitutes in the *Gilgamesh* epic, Shamhat, Siduri the tavern-keeper, Ishtar, etc., unlike their real-life counterparts, the tarts of Mesopotamia, depicted through actions and words as kind, loyal, and long-suffering? Is *knowingness* in itself a virtue? The prostitutes of ancient Israel who are seen as converting nature into culture, even to the socialization of children, for some peculiar reason always mysteriously serve as the prime representation of urban life.

There is no noun in the English language for someone who commits incest. (Insect?) Actress Gloria Swanson, who posed in magazines for advertisements for Jergens face-cream, kept her face unblemished and smooth, according to rumor, by applying semen to it. Are the Burmese belles of Padaung—the Kewawnqdu—at all aware that the rows of brass rings they wear around their long necks are incontestably phallic? All of the great western epics are anti-marriage. Gilgamesh mistrusts Ishtar; Achilles, Briseus; Odysseus, Penelope; and in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* Adam, Eve.

The American Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution, *did not specifically recognize* the right to privacy. It was simply assumed later that, taken altogether, the amendments as presented radiated such a powerful ethical penumbra that a right of privacy and a woman's right to an abortion in the first trimester of her pregnancy are implicit in the Bill of Rights. Can ethics be proximate? Is supposition valid in law? What about the effect of changing sexual mores and the nature of virtue in a sexual society?

Vinegar, menthol, lemon juice, lime juice, aspirin, fear, and madly aggressive human confrontation reputedly diminish sexual desire and performance. Regarding Hitler, (1) was his languid version of the Nazi salute gay semaphore? (2) what are we to think of Salvador Dalí's confession that he dreamt of Hitler "as a woman" whose flesh "ravished me"? (3) was he a nympholept? The honorific "*Maitre*" is the standard designation for all members of the French legal profession, regardless of sex.

Exactly what does Bette Davis's cousin George mean when in the movie *Mr. Skeffington* (1944) he roundly declares, "No women is beauti-

ful until she gets on the cover of the *Police Gazette*"? Bananas, contrary to their phallicism, do not reproduce sexually, but, seedless wonders, propagate vegetatively, by suckering. What was the precise romantic mind-set of Abraham Lincoln who always said that he was glad he was not born a woman because he could never say no? Could the fact of his never once in all of his life, as he confessed, ever finish reading a novel speak to a fear of *la condition romantique*?

Are not all creation myths—Silence [Σίγή] and the Deep [Βάθύζ], Elohim and Eden, the Virgin and the Holy Spirit, etc. —matings? Lesbianism, unlike male homosexuality, was never banned in Victorian England simply because the queen could never bring herself to believe that such nefarious things were done by women. A "whispering rod" of about seven-feet long was used as a means of communicating love in crowded rooms in Good Olde Colony Times in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Camille Saint-Saëns, the French composer of *The Carnival of Animals*, secretly confided to his journal of having forced a live mouse up his bumhole as a sexual experiment.

Poetaster Maya Angelou, wooed by celebrity Oprah Winfrey who has boastfully referred to her on her television show as "my spiritual mother"—Angelou once worked as the mistress in a lesbian brothel—has gone on record as believing that the main reason that plain girls do not enjoy sexual intercourse is not because they are godly or chaste or proud or well-brought up but because they don't get the chance to do so! Is this not a homely woman's crass chauvinism? The cynical Angelou writes in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* with appalling vulgarity, "I believe that most plain girls are virtuous because of the scarcity of the opportunity to be otherwise. They shield themselves with an aura of unavailableness (for which after a time they begin to take credit largely as a defense tactic)."

FBI Chief J. Edgar Hoover's three favorite drag ensembles were 1) a plush evening gown, with blonde wig; 2) a scarlet "Roaring Twenties" dress accessoried with an elegant black feather boa; 3) a kinky black dress, lace stockings, high heels, and false eyelashes. When rock 'n' roller Little Richard splendidly wore a glass shirt weighing ten pounds as well as green neon-light in his hair while performing "You Got to Have a Beat in Your Body," wasn't he giving as much glory and honor to God as King Solomon (a black man, according to Little Richard) did in his elegant raiments?

Do populations in a given place increase or decrease in relation to

the sexual strictness or permissiveness of that particular population? In the 1980s, because of its understanding and cultural nonchalance, Estonia became a country to which gay Muslims from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkistan flocked in decidedly large numbers. What did the remark of the impetuous Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk, the prototype of Robinson Crusoe, indicate of his sexuality when he said that what he most missed after living on the deserted island of Juan Fernandez for four years and four months was bread and salt?

When the painter Paul Cézanne, who disliked being touched and was fearful of women, confessed, "Women models frighten me," was he making a misogynistic or a distancing remark? When he repeatedly told the models, "Be an apple!" was he objectifying them and did it in some symbolic way indicate an Edenic preoccupation? Novelist E.M. Forster, who contentedly lived with his mother all of his life until she died in her nineties, actually—literally—wanted to marry her, and he has gone on record as never knowing until late in life how sexual intercourse was performed between a man and a woman.

The sole love of the sinister, terribly cagey, and often paranoid Confederate Attorney General Judah P. Benjamin, whose immediately disenchanted wife Natalie Martin, along with their one daughter, left the South to spend fifty contented years in Paris without him—when she did write to him she addressed him coldly as "*mon père*"—was in fact one of his very own sisters, Rebecca. A severe neurotic who was disgracefully kicked out of Yale University for nefariously stealing jewelry from his college classmates, the covert and duplicitous Benjamin, perhaps in consequence, spent not only a lifetime seeking out every last bit of his own correspondence, destroying his private papers and every single letter he had ever sent or received, but peevishly occupied virtually every moment of his last years of life devoted to the task of incineration!

Feminist professor/author Mary Daly, who consistently tried to ban any and all males from her college classrooms at Boston College, dismissed the symbols of the Christian cross and crucifixion as expressions of patriarchal spirituality. It is the bad hygiene of hobos and street people that make them all celibate, according to George Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. In the history of all Arctic and Antarctic explorations the subject of sex on board ship was a distinct taboo. It is a long-held, continent-crossing cultural legend, regarding a

pregnant woman's good or bad looks as she is carrying, that girl babies *in utero* steal their mothers beauty. Love for Catholics is self-pity and for Protestants duty, according to Phillip Wylie in his cranky book, *Opus 21*.

Poet William Wordsworth, in atonement for the sexual dissipation of his youthful days in France, later became one of the most severe moralists who ever lived. Blaise Pascal, repenting the pollutions of his sensual youth, hyperscrupulously came to deem even his own mother's kiss a crime. The religious allegorist John Bunyan's conscience was so painfully acute as to approach the borderland of disease, and, among his most terrible sins, he remorsefully included dancing, playing hockey, and the ringing of bells. Ring Lardner, who was a prude, some insist from once having had an early skirmish with venereal disease, campaigned all his life against the kinds of pornography that violated his standards, which included what he felt were overly risqué and suggestive songs capable of corrupting youth with titles such as "Love Me Tonight," "As You Desire Me," "And So to Bed," and "Forbidden Love."

It was the belief of Georg Groddeck as advanced in *The Book of the It* that whoever hates his mother dreads to have a child of his own, for the life of a man is ruled by the law "As thou to me, so I to thee." The death of Hephaestion so upset the love of his life, Alexander the Great, that the conqueror lay supine upon the body for a day and a night until his friends dragged him away by force. For three days he could only lie weeping and mute, barely rational, fasting as he was and entirely unapproachable. Alexander not only sheared off his hair just as Achilles had over the death of Patroclus (the usual tribute at the time was a single lock, tied into a grave wreath) but had the manes and tails of all the horses clipped, as well, after which he put the doctor to death for having given Hephaestion a noxious drug.

Opposing phallic fascism, feminist Luce Irigaray in her book *Speculum* advances the unique theory that the "unitary penis" can only repeat itself, whereas the far greater symbol of a woman's two vaginal lips, her labiae, interactively in touch with each other, creatively bonding, not separated by negation, merging in a way that man's gentials can never do, celebratorily create, by their very being, a vaginal language, "diffuse, diversified, multiple, decentered," which can be "heard" only if one "listens" with the correct *jouissance*!

When Jo Stockton (Audrey Hepburn) in the movie *Funny Face* (1957)

asserts, "I see no functional advantage in a marvelous mouth," was she serious? The theological defense of the inviolate and unchanging youth of the Blessed Virgin Mary's — see her youthful image in the history of painting and sculpture — is her virginity. Virtually all men fail to understand that a woman's breast measurement is the circumference of the chest below the breasts and that the numerical measurement of her bra has nothing to do with the measurement of her breasts.

Queen Victoria hated childbearing, which she called the "shadow side of marriage." On the controversial subject of "creative marriage," inventors Wilbur and Orville Wright, who were practically inseparable, remained bachelors for their entire life. Playwright Tennessee Williams held ambiguous feelings about the hate-crime of gay-bashing, declaring with sangfroid, "Not that I like being struck, I hated it but [I valued] the keenness of the emotional situation, the material for art." Poet Algernon Swinburne was amorously addicted to the survey, aesthetic estimate, and unflagging admiration—ogling—of all small babies. Each and every single bomb planted in New York City by the perpetually smiling George Metesky, the notorious "Mad Bomber" of the 1950s, was shaped like a penis.

Theodor Reik believed that the process of falling in love is invariably preceded by dissatisfaction with oneself, a yearning *for* something better, and that the bliss that love produces is due to the improvement of the self by the substitution of one's low ego by the ego-ideal. On the other hand, crank feminist Shulamith Firestone, often cited for her nurturing remarks that "pregnancy is barbaric," that pregnancy "hurts," and that pregnancy "isn't good for you," defines the act of falling in love as no more than the process of alteration of male vision—through idealization, mystification, glorification—that renders void the woman's class inferiority. The Kama Sutra describes 84 positions for sexual intercourse, each of which has a name, not unlike several of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "Zanzibar Wheelbarrow," "Bicycle on the Sea," "Chicken on the Grill," etc.

The element of love, which commonly plays so large a part in fiction, is wholly absent from the novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, a curious omission. There is also no description of scenery—in a book suited for it—no pathos, and no humor. The male adventure always excludes women, as in the American novel in which protagonists are always trying to get away from women, the distaff world, domestication, marriage, the temptation to settle down. (cf. Cooper's *The Deerslayer*,

Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Melville's Moby-Dick, etc.)

The most common motive of the serial sex-murderer—a creature who is, ironically, often pleasant, neat, gentle, deferential, punctual, polite, and ingratiating in appearance—is a deep and unappeasable fury against his mother. Such traits of character, which can be traced to the very same training that has been given him by the hated female figure foster, indeed are, the very same murderous feelings of resentment he harbors against her for the very abuse of her domination. Cause becomes effect. She who has robbed him of self-esteem and stolen his identity, as he sees it, must die so that he can be completely free of her in order to direct his libido elsewhere and be as other men. When receiving a letter from her lover, John Middleton Murry, Katharine Mansfield always excavated the envelope, as she confessed to him, "to sniff the inside, screwing up my eyes to see the bottom, shaking it in the hope that one of your eyelashes or perhaps a little wink from you might still be in there."

When German novelist Ingeborg Bachmann, who stated that in all human relationships men are fascists and women are their victims, once ruefully declared of herself that "Two people are in me. Neither understands the other," might not one assume that (a) she had only one image in mind and that (b) she was talking to herself? The Serbian teenager, Gavrilo Princip, who assassinated the Austrian archduke Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, an isolated and desperate act that nevertheless became the formal cause that precipitated World War I, would have shot anybody that morning, for the youth was furious, murderously so, simply because, as was later made clear, the previous night his girlfriend, Jelena Milisic, would not relent and sleep with him.

Why does Oedipus pluck out his *eyes* rather than castrate himself upon the hideous and repulsive discovery that he has slain his father and taken his mother, Jocasta, for his wife? Severely faulting men for looking at women, psychologist Ellen Kaschak writes, "It is by virtue of their gaze that men sin against women, that they objectify them, make them prisoners of appearance, of age and color, of physical beauty, of their shape and size. Only through blindness can such sight cease to oppress." But if there is sin in seeing, is not blindness the greater anodyne against the blasphemy of lust?

Sculptor Frederic S. Remington never once modeled or painted a woman. Regarding the question of the solipsistic and therefore often

heartless or unfeeling nature of the artist, was it not vividly confirmed by Goethe, that great lover, who told us himself how composing his verses while in the arms of his beloved he with singing fingers softly tapped the beat of his hexameters on her shapely back? Jane Austen wrote to her niece, Fanny Knight, "Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection." The thirteenth-century *Codex Latinus Manacensis* held that a wife's willingness to deviate from missionary position coitus was as serious a sin as murder. Rear entry intercourse was permitted for medical reasons (e.g., obesity) as long as it was done with "pain in the soul."

King Solomon, who wrote the *Song of Songs*, a book that extols the virtue of fidelity in marriage, had 700 wives and 300 concubines (I Kings 11:3). When Thirties gangster John Dillinger said, "Never trust a woman or an automatic pistol," was he disdainfully but symbolically comparing what he considered the characteristic infidelity of the female sex with the perfunctory sex-act they require of the male? Novelist Somerset Maugham, who claimed in *The Summing Up* to have experienced the bliss of requited love, while parenthetically observing that affection has nothing to do with love, confessed, "I have most loved people who cared little or nothing for me and when people have loved me I have been embarrassed." He wrote unequivocally, "I am incapable of complete surrender."

Was the Biblical caveat, "Do not look at wine when it is red" (Proverbs 23:31) part of an anti-menstrual fiat? Saint Jean Vianney, the French saint, flatly prohibited the act of dancing in his parish, explaining, "John the Baptist was killed by a dance." Leonardo da Vinci, the great master painter who sublimated his libido into a deep thirst for knowledge, was sexually inactive throughout his life; he frankly confessed in his journals, "The act of procreation and the members employed therein are so repulsive that, if it were not for the beauty of the faces and the adornments of the actors and the pent-up impulse, nature would lose the human species."

Al-Qaeda hijacker Muhammed Atta, before the suicidal Jihadist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, left a personal will which he drew up in 1996, stating, "Women must not be present at my funeral or go to my grave [sic] at any later date. He who washes my body around my genitals should wear gloves so that I am not touched there." Painter Marcel Duchamp who vowed never to marry or have children suddenly did get married to young

French automobile heiress—he spent the first week of marriage playing chess so incessantly that one night his wife got up and glued the chess pieces to the board—and four months later they were divorced.

Although novelist H. G. Wells was fat and homely he was enormously successful with women; Somerset Maugham once asked one of his mistresses what especially attracted her to him. "I expected her to say his acute mind, and his sense of fun: not at all," Maugham wrote. "She said that his body smelt of honey." By one account, novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky considered photographs obscene. Would that have been the same attitude of *New Yorker* editor William Shawn, who did not believe that photographs should ever be used in that magazine, or was it that he was invidiously disdainful of Henry Luce and *Life* magazine?

Was the "obscure hurt" that novelist Henry James enigmatically referred to regarding his person, a wound that kept him from Civil War conscription, a semi-castrational blow, as he several times hinted it might be, from the whipping about of a suddenly filled and obstreperous fire-hose that hit him in the groin? Or could the remark have been the upshot of malicious humor? ("The Master" supposedly did once privately divulge that the mysterious and often guessed-at article in his novel *The Ambassadors*, on the manufacture of which the fortune of the widow Newsome was founded and the nature of which the writer had left in polite obscurity in the book, was in fact a chamber pot. My hunch is it was urinal candy.

In his South American travel accounts, Charles Darwin refers to encountering tribes of buttock lovers who made their selection for a mate by "ranging [their women] in a line, and by picking her out who projects farthest *a tengo*." It has been said that for an opera singer, a diva, a *prima donna assoluta*, to hit the hugely difficult note of high C—under bright lights, say, in front of 6,000 people—which the normal human voice does not accommodate, she has to tap into the superiority of not only her musical but her sexual power. When after much hesitation William Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson, he insisted that his sister, Dorothy, with whom he was almost abnormally close, spend the night before the ceremony with Mary's ring on her finger. (She did not attend the wedding.) Spanish male flamenco dancers, stomping about with seeming virility, are almost all gay.

Saint Francis of Assisi, whose love of animals, indeed of nature itself, was legendary—he walked reverently on stones and was so fas-

cinated by fire that he went so far as not allowing it to be roughly extinguished by his friars—nevertheless hated ants and despised mice and rats, a loathing that stemmed from a period when, convalescing in a cell (he suffered from acute eye trouble) allowed for him at the cloister of San Damiano, he felt plagued by their burrowing intrusions. It was at this very same cloistral enclosure that he briefly met and, it is said, fell deeply in love with one Signorina Chiara di Favorone, later Saint Clare, Santa Clara, the great founder of the Poor Clare nuns, with whom he was able to communicate, thereafter, according to the strict papal order of Honorius III in 1218, only through a grilled window. Could it be that young Francis Bernadone all his life could not help but associate these insects and rodents with his separation from Saint Clare, whom he subsequently encouraged to become a "bride of Christ," and never forgive them?

The Hindus are perhaps the only people in history that have never taken homosexuality seriously. Doesn't Kamdev, the god of love (or, as we would call him, Cupid), fall in love with the young handsome Krishna with impunity? During the making of the classic film *The Story of Adèle H.*, director François Truffaut requested of Bruce Robinson, the actor who portrayed dashing English lieutenant Albert Pinson—the man who became the obsessive love-object of Victor Hugo's bewildered, deluded, and eventually deranged daughter—to play the soldier as a victim more than as a villain. "Just remember," said Truffaut, with some sagacious advice, "that no man can stand being loved 100 percent."

"Sexual intercourse has never done anyone any good and may well have done harm," Lucretius wrote in his poem of Latin hexameters, *On the Nature of Things*. Was this perhaps a personal confession? In the Christian chronicle of Saint Jerome we read that Lucretius, after having been driven completely mad by a love philter administered by his wife, committed suicide. Is it a coincidence that at the time that Pablo Picasso painted *Guernica*, his rendering on a colorless piece of unbleached muslin of the devastating bombing of that Basque village by the German Condor legion in a three-hour attack in 1937, not only was his own personal life in turmoil—he was separated from his wife, Olga; quarreling with his mistress, Marie-Thérèse Walter; and living with painter and photographer Dora Marr—but that all of the victims in the dark and disturbing painting, except for the hero at the bottom of the painting with that clenched and defiant fist, are women?

Jane Austen, who in her novels expressly regarded married love as the *summum bonum* of one's life, never lost her virginity; was engaged once for only half an hour; made it implicitly clear that she disliked children and all doting parents; had an aversion to "mothering" (i.e., childbearing); and wrote in her novel, *Mansfield Park,* that "there is not one in a hundred of either sex who is not taken in when they marry . . . it is, of all transactions, the one in which people expect most from others, and are least honest themselves," not only led a singularly uneventful life—she never met a single celebrity, experienced nothing of moment, and never traveled farther from her native Hampshire than Lyme Regis, Bath, and London—but also died at forty-two a professional aunt.

Why did David the Psalmist pray to the Lord "to enlarge his feet"? Had he something less savory in mind, and was this an example at transferal? Just as when we accuse others we are often excusing ourselves, is it not true that when we love, we are asking only that we *be* loved? Are not love and freedom mutually exclusive?

Agrippina, who became the fourth wife of the emperor Claudius, had him adopt her son, Lucius Donitius, aka Nero. His real father was the beast Gnaeus Donitius Ahenobarbus, who had died. On her own terms, Agrippina always wielded power—she was the great-granddaughter of Augustus himself—but after her indulged son had become emperor, married Octavia, but soon wanted to shelve her in favor of his new amorata, Poppaea, his angry mother refused to countenance it. So Nero had her killed, sending assassins to knife her at her seaside villa on the Bay of Naples in 59 A.D. Legend has it that as one of the assassins raised his sword for the *coup de grâce*, she pointed to her womb and cried, "*Strike here!*"

Greta Garbo found the scent of Montecristo cigars so erotic that she compulsively kept boxes of them about at home and when traveling in the chance that meeting a prospective lover she might offer one to him (or her). The old prospector Howard (played by Walter Huston) tells his partners in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), "If I were you, I wouldn't think or talk about women, it ain't good for your health." Curiously—in consequence?—no women appear in the film. Menstruating women are prevented from entering temples in Bali. The famous student discussion group of Trinity College known as the "Apostles" considered homosexuality not only to be respectable but always referring to it as the "Higher Sodomy" reverently treated it as

a more spiritual form of love. When she screamed to her agent in *The Star* (1952), "Take your 10% hands off me!" was the irritated Bette Davis implying that she might have been more obliging for a higher or lower percentage?

There has never been a homosexual cult around a male figure, such as gays have always fiercely shown for Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, et al. Gay men who seem to entertain no such focused fantasies about men or about themselves as men all yearn to be women—to be women precisely like these, bold brave, theatrical survivors who have known suffering and success, torture and triumph, desperation and drive. Such women often seem like homosexuals in drag themselves. If gays' mothers are their mates, are these substitutes?

Scientist Francis Crick, of DNA fame, believed that poor people were genetically inferior and should all be bribed to have no children. Senac de Meilhan (1736-1803) cynically wrote, "Many are the false tales recited about women; they are but a weak compensation for the true ones of which we are unaware." Saint Francis always denigratingly referred to his recalcitrant body as "Brother Donkey." ("I have been too harsh on Brother Donkey," he confessed on his death, according to legend, when asked if he had any regrets.) "All Greek men beat their women," claimed Aristotle Onassis, who once admitted to a friend, Yannis Georgakis, that discovering his first wife's treachery—Tina's affairs and secrets with his lifelong rival, Stavros Niarchos—had sexually aroused him.

Strangely, although she was sexually amoral, sexual and sensual, actress Tallulah Bankhead *hated* to be touched, even by her friends and especially by surprise. A woman's voice, soft and seductive, has for millennia remained taboo in the male world: Juvenal the satirist scornfully described a woman's voice as "having fingers." Saint Paul insisted that women keep silence in churches; an eighteenth-century Talmudist asserted that the voice of woman is "nakedness"; Byron insisted that women not talk; a New England preacher in 1619 pronounced, "The tongue is a witch." Poet Anna Akhmatova wrote, "I taught women to speak . . . / But Lord, how to make them cease." "Happy love has no history," Denis de Rougement in *Love in the Western World*. "Romance only comes into existence where love is fatal, frowned upon, and doomed by life itself."

A kangaroo's penis is forked. Abraham of Ur, patriarch of the Jews, never practiced or advocated the act of circumcision. The English

poet William Blake, whose visionary gift was so strongly developed that supposedly he could look at a knot in a piece of wood until he was frightened by it, often sat with his wife Catherine in their garden, both stark naked, while reading Milton's *Paradise Lost.* The lyrics to the bouncy and familiar song "You Are My Sunshine" are addressed to a woman who has *deserted* the singer.

"Nothing is uglier to me than a pregnant woman," asserted V.S. Naipaul, according to novelist Paul Theroux. Baron Corvo felt the same. Lady Lawford (May Sommerville), actor Peter Lawford's mother, who viewed sexual intercourse as a disgusting and imperious act, dismissed it, exclaiming, "It was so messy. It was the only part of marriage that I could not stand." (Her first husband said of her, "I'd rather be in bed with a dead policeman. You're like sleeping with a wet umbrella.") Mumps, from which he suffered, rendered drama critic Alexander Woollcott sexually impotent.

Women in Ethiopia fear becoming barren if they are photographed. (The Koran actually forbids photography. What kind of prescience had Mohammed 1300 years ago to foresee the modern invention of the camera? Simple. He was a prophet.) Holding the hand of his wife Constanza, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed a piece of music. Poet Philip Larkin once wrote a poem to his wife, which was singularly odd, simply because he had never married. The Elizabethan poet Thomas Calver believed that Jewish men menstruated. The ambiguously sounding word *fach* is a Welsh expression of endearment.

During the initial days of movie censorship in the 1920s under the Production Code of Will Hays, a Presbyterian elder and Indiana Republican, among the long list of *don'ts* and *be carefuls* of what could not be shown on screen were scenes of actual childbirth, miscegenation, ridicule of the clergy, sex hygiene, heavy petting, nudity in silhouette, children's sex organs, and, in Ohio, it was flatly prohibited to show female undergarments fluttering on a clothesline.

The movie *Thelma and Louise*, a classic example of unintentional self-parody, purports on a surface level to be a statement about female liberation but reveals in the end a grim portrait of two insufferably cranky, uneducated, man-hating marginals who deserve little pity, for in their extreme gender-hatred they come to embody regarding their own sex the very vileness they despise in the other. Impresario Florenz Ziegfeld, creator of the renowned Broadway "Follies" and something of a prig, claimed that a truly lovely woman could never have grey

eyes. "Anything but grey," he stated. "Grey eyes can't be beautiful. They are too intellectual and belong only to the college girl."

British poet Rupert Brooke lamented the *angles* of the human body as a shape to love ("No perfection grows / 'twixt leg and arm, elbow, and ear, and nose / And joint, and socket"); he rather wished that we humans could "grow to radiant round love . . . love moon to moon." We in our odd bodies are the "gaunt zanies of a witless fate." "Grotesquely twined, extravagantly lost / By crescive paths and strange protuberant ways / From sanity and from wholeness and from grace," the poet wistfully asked, "How can love triumph . . . ?"

The bedroom in the apartment of *The Honeymooners*, Jackie Gleason's TV sitcom, was never once shown. Queen Elizabeth I, who in her mid-fifties had black teeth and wore a wig (to cover "pressed grass" in the words of Edmund Spenser), banished mirrors from all her palaces. Ralph Waldo Emerson once had to rap a water glass at his table when two guests, Thoreau and Agassiz, introduced the mating of turtles into the talk. Writer and suicideYukio Mishima, who married to please his mother and in whose novel, *Confessions of a Mask*, the narrator confesses that for him the word "woman" held no more excitement than the words "pencil" or "broom," at age 32 telephoned a friend to announce, more from surprise than delight, that he had finally had sex with a woman.

Deuteronomy 22:11 prohibits the use of blended fabrics and worsteds as examples of adultery. Homosexuality in Singapore is illegal, punishable with ten years to life, and in Malaysia all inverts are caned with a *rotan* as a punishment. (In both countries, drug-traffickers—any and all—are hanged.) Vientiane, Laos, a city that as an R & R haven for American soldiers during the Vietnam War was a megiddo of a place riddled with brothels, porno shops, filthy bars, exploited young girls, and no end of drugs, became after the military pull-out a quiet, chaste, and serene world without a trace of that vileness. Many solid cultures believe that incestry produces superior beings. In Singapore if one can be seen naked in his or her own house, be it a shack or a third floor—even on the tenth floor of a hotel—he or she will be summarily, and heavily, fined. May it not legitimately be asserted that insects are the husbands of flowers?

Travel writer Jan Morris (who believes the city of Venice to be "not sensual, but sexual") asserted that "all the best sex aspires to the condition of incest," adding, "Brothers and sisters we all become, if we love

each other deep and long enough." Franz Kafka noted that in Russia during the period between birth and circumcision both a mother and son were thought to be vulnerable to devils. Living in Sri Lanka for Westerners is very often code for being a poofter. General Douglas MacArthur never had a successful or happy relationship with a woman until his domineering and over-attentive mother—the central, authoritative figure in his life for fifty-seven years—passed away, whereupon he immediately did.

Poets Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, although married, never saw each other naked. In China, the remark "*Ni you pino liang di lu mao zi*," which literally translates "You have a pretty green hat"—a phrase that is widely understood there as "Your wife is cheating on you"—is considered a mortal insult. Gay American poet Walt Whitman in the course of censoring his personal papers for erotic content often substituted feminine pronouns for the original masculine pronouns he wanted to cover up. A runway model's essential fashion statement is emaciation. No gay man has an uncomplicated relationship—love or hate—with his mother.

No law exists against incest in the state of Rhode Island. The artist Man Ray was a compulsive axillist, his favorite part of a woman's body being her armpit. There is not a single reference in the Old Testament pertaining to the female sex organ. John Cowper Powys in his *Autobiography* (1934) omits all mention of the women in his life. Pediophilia, the sexual arousal from dolls, demonstrates in the paraphilia of its obsessives a tangential connection to a need for perfectionism. Mrs. Lynne Cheney, the right-wing wife of Vice President Dick Cheney, wrote a novel in 1981 filled, according to Russ Kick, author of *Psychotropedia*, with "disfiguring violence, animal cruelty, feminist thought, and among other things, several instances of taking the Lord's name in vain."

Semen is a superb facial cream, according to Helen Gurley Brown in her book *Sex and the Single Girl*, in which she gushed, "It's full of babies!" In Japan, fully naked women can make a living as human food platters or body sushi, what is called *nyotaimori*, lying still for an hour at a time in special restaurants while using their bodies for men and women to eat from. Eighty-seven percent of American teachers presently are women, making for the pronounced neglect, according to sociologists, of boys and lowering their academic, social, and image standards in school. Actress Agnes Moorehead believed that women could have lesbian feelings without being homosexual and that love

does not have a sex.

In her muddled, incoherent, semi-literate, and endlessly repellent rant *The Making of Americans* (925 pages), that total fraud Miss Gertrude Stein—as a metaphor for her writing? — actually records entire scenes of herself shitting: "I am always feeling each kind of them as a substance darker, lighter, thinner, thicker, muddier, clearer, smoother, lumpier, granularer [*sic*], mixeder [*sic*]," etc. etc. In Augustine's view, intercourse *without pleasure* had occurred in Eden before "The Fall. It was his belief that man could fully control his organs in Paradise. Marital sex from lust was sinful.

In the film version of Clare Booth's *The Women* (1939), with script by Anita Loos, everything connected to the movie project was female: the entire cast, the actresses, the movie crew, the books in the library were all by female authors, all the photos and art objects, even the animals (monkeys, dogs, etc.) were female, along with the director, George Cukor, who was a declared invert. Tallulah Bankhead claimed that she could never have an orgasm with someone she loved. Wedding presents are always sent to the bride, even by personal friends of the groom.

In the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, there was actually a brothel called The Puff that was frequented by SS men and some favored prisoners, even though all through the entire country at the time racial in-breeding was forbidden and sexual intercourse by *Rassenschade*, or race defilement, carried a jail sentence. (Under the Nuremberg Race Law passed in September 1935, it was an offense for Germans to marry Jews.) Poet W. B. Yeats spent his entire honeymoon using his wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees, as a medium through which, by her gift for "automatic writing," channeling, he could contact and comprehend the spirit world.

It made Lord George Gordon Byron literally ill to see a woman eat. "After the sin of murder, whereby human nature already in actual existence is destroyed," wrote the brilliant Dominican friar and theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Contra Gentiles,* "homosexual liaisons and male anal intercourse seems to hold second place, whereby the generation of human nature is precluded." (Among the very earliest laws of the kingdom of Jerusalem, established by Christians after the First Crusade and following Genesis 18 and 19 as well as Leviticus 18:22, was the extreme one calling for the immediate burning of "sodomites.")

Belgian novelist Georges Simenon, whom many claimed was a compulsive liar, boasted to have slept with 10,000 woman—nannies, maids, *filles facilles*, etc. (His wife said that it was more like 1,200.) Greta Garbo claimed that in her sensuous dreams she often saw the faces of people she knew on *oranges*. Saint Teresa of Avila, in her passion for the Lord, "desired ardently" to know literally the color of Christ's eyes and the proportions of his stature. ("Impurities of female sanctity!" remarked essayist E. M. Cioran, with disapproval. "To carry the indiscretion of her sex up to Heaven itself.") Homosexuals never get the gout. After David committed adultery with Bathsheba, he sang the lamentation to Jehovah in Psalm 51:4: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." *You only*? What about Bathsheba's husband?

"A novelist is a man who does not like his mother or who never received mother love," wrote George Simenon of Honoré de Balzac. May in fact one assert that mother-hatred is the point of departure for the creative urge, by one irrefutable definition "getting another start in life"? The anti-mother side of artists should perhaps be closely analyzed to explain the freeing of the creative side? If art is a recipe for survival, a theory that is often said, may not the mother-as-anti-muse, she who makes one feel inadequate, belittled, small, useless, etc., foster the need in her children to write, paint, sculpt, dance, compose, etc.? Eighteenth-century poet Richard Savage, diarist Anne Frank, composer Alan Jay Lerner, Artie Shaw, Judy Garland, Arturo Toscanini, Gore Vidal, Ty Cobb, Eugene O'Neill, Stephen Sondheim, James Montgomery Flagg, Eleanor Roosevelt, Frank O'Hara, playwright John Osborne, Edward Albee, Maria Callas, et alii, all hated their mothers. Papa Hemingway always referred to his mother as "that bitch." Sportscaster Howard Cosell (né Cohen) wrote a 390-page autobiography without once ever mentioning his mother's name.

Why are the female Yahoos in *Gulliver's Travels* selected for satirist Jonathan Swift's most venomous passages? Everywhere in his writings, he mocks the female physique. Was it ever ascertained that Swift ever married Hester Johnson, the Galatia to his Pygmalion—his famous and durable "Stella"—a woman with whom he was connected all his life? If so, there is no hint that the marriage was ever consummated. (Quirkily, madly—can you believe this?—he never allowed her to see him alone.) Charles Dickens, who all his life would never forget or forgive that his mother was "warm" for sending him not to school but

back to the blacking factory, rarely gives us a glimpse of a mother who was maternal. Henry James in so many of his stories and novels saw women as somehow untrustworthy and love as a loss of balance. In the famous feudal formulas of Walt Disney's animated films, why is it that his villains were almost always women, whether cackling or cool, dark or ditsy?

Jesus Christ, who never married himself—setting a paradigm for purity—not only told us that none of the angels in heaven ever marry but assured mankind that at the resurrection "people will neither marry nor be given in marriage" (Matthew 22:30). Tim McCarver, the first catcher ever to lead either league in triples, once said that hitting a triple is better than sex. TV's "Mister Rogers"—Fred, of Latrobe, Pennsylvania—who not only came across as properly sexless on the show but who always appeared more like a dutiful *son* than anything else, always wore a cardigan with a zipper that his mother had made for him for all 865 programs he made.

As to the absence of Puritan eros, pilgrim leader John Winthrop, although he was married three times—to Mary Forth, Thomasine Clopton, and Margaret Tyndal—and found it difficult like most Puritans to reconcile heavenly passions with the love of a wife, in the words of historian Edmund S. Morgan still loved his God "with all the sensual abandon that he denied himself in dealing with the world." Winthrop apostrophizes God in the most sensual terms, in words and images clearly referring to the *Song of Songs*:

> Drawe us with the sweetness of thine odours, that we may runne after thee, allure us . . . let us heare that sweet voyce of thine, my love, my dove, my undefiled: spread thy skirt over us and cover our deformitye, make us sick with thy love: let us Sleep in thine arms, and awake in thy kingdome.

Estée Lauder of beauty-products fame often candidly if vulgarly pointed out that in the desperation of her greed whenever she shopped her crèmes and lotions and unguents, selling them door to door like a drummer when she first began, her best business ploy was, ingratiatingly, crudely, to *touch* all of her customers—literally, putting her hands on them—in order to guarantee even if by false and immodest intimacy bigger sales. Was it because of their narcissism that Dorothy Parker said, "Scratch an actor and you'll find an actress"? In her column Dorothy Kilgallen once took Joan Crawford to task for the act of

combing her hair in public.

Was Gustave Flaubert's paraphiliac love of the idea of "remote intimacy"—inaccessible affection—the cause of his fetishizing footwear or was it the reverse? He had (suffered? enjoyed?) a case of acousticophilia, or arousal from sound, like certain men, for example, who inordinately thrill to the sound of women walking in loud shoes, tap-dancing, kicking a door, etc. "Walking in the morning on sidewalks where prostitutes patrolled the night before made [Flaubert's] legs tingle," wrote Frederick Brown in *Flaubert.*

The longest kiss in film history—between Jane Wyman and Regis Toomey in *You're in the Army Now* (1940)—lasted exactly 185 seconds. Sexologist Havelock Ellis was an inveterate undinist: he loved to observe and to hear women pissing. British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli once declared, "Nothing is of so much importance and of so much use to a young man entering life as to be well-criticized by women." Eighteen of the fifty United States, including New York and California, legally allow for sex and marriage between cousins. Elizabeth Taylor had a clause in all her film contracts providing that she would not have to work during the first two days of her period. "Fish fuck in it" was the sole explanation that comedian W. C. Fields gave as the reason why he never drank water.

The first human to give birth was a man, not a woman—consider Adam's fainting spell during which God, the obstetrician, extracted Eve from his body (Genesis 2:21). To Antonin Artaud, sexuality more than anything else was not a boon but a *barrier* to the rapprochement between men and women. The samurai used make-up. The pistoning sex-technique Mutrux offers as the most artful, he claims to have taken from the tried-and-true method of songwriter Irving Berlin whose repeated use of short verses followed by a long choruses in song after song defined rhythm. Why is it that any dress with pleats is sexy?

"I think they were a basic mistake and the whole dualistic universe evolved from this error," proclaimed novelist William Burroughs of women. He added darkly, "I think what we call love is a fraud perpetrated by the female sex, and that the point of sexual relations between men is nothing that we could call love but rather what we might call *recognition*." In *The Soft Machine*, Burroughs, who believed that the less the two sexes have to do with each other, the better, proposed that the sexes be separated, that all male children be raised by males and all female children be raised by women. "I think [American women] are

possibly one of the worse expressions of the female sex...The whole worship of women that flourished in the Old South, and in frontier days, when there weren't many, is still basic in American life."

Why do grooms rent and brides buy? No woman ever possessed a key to the doors of Andy Warhol's Factory. Novelist Patricia Highsmith once proclaimed, "The danger of living with somebody, for me, is the danger of living without one's normal diet of passion. Give me fantasies any day. Fantasies of making love to an attractive friend who is unavailable." Paradoxically, most of the words in French, medical or slang, for the male member are feminine: *la vierge*, *la queue*, *la bitte*, while most of the words for the female "member" are curiously maculine: *le vagin*, *le con*, *le chat*, *le nit chaud*.

No great poetry has been written about motherhood. "As I see it, manliness is a quality for protecting the female and not for deflowering her," said the invert Jean Genet (*Playboy*, April 1964). On an assignation, gays will often bring along a shopping-bag into a men's room, one to stand in it to avoid being seen below the partition. Of all the great writers in England since the Renaissance, more than half were celibate or lived apart from their wives. H. L. Mencken observed in his *In Defense of Women*, "The average man, whatever his stupidity, is at least keen enough in judgement to prefer a sexy smile from a genuinely attractive woman to the last delirious favors of the typical suffragette." In James M. Cain's novel, *Galatea*, Val tries to kill his young wife, Holly, by overfeeding her, and at one point she becomes obese enough to serve at recess as a superball in a schoolyard. Bull semen has proven to be an excellent enricher and conditioner for women's hair.

Pablo Picasso despised thin women. Valerie Solanas, in her man-hating *SCUM Manifesto,* wrote of a hopeful future for the world in which all babies are produced in factories; all babies, furthermore, at least according to her, will be female. Feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson, who advocated test tubes as wombs of the future, told *Life* magazine, "It's so immature to grow babies in people's bodies." In Japan, of the many socially received "ways" to perform tasks correctly—called *dō* or *michi*—such as to serve tea or to wrap a kimono, one of them is *shudō*, the way of loving boys.

Why are the defenders of sexual freedom almost always damaged creatures—Marie Stopes, Mary Daly, Havelock Ellis, Larry Flynt, Al Goldstein, and, among others, Margaret Sanger who compared the average man's sexual technique to "an orangutang trying to play the

violin"—people personally twisted in some essential way and with crippled views who have eaten, and bitterly, the dust of humiliation and rejection and loss? Why did Hitler, who was a bachelor, never swim, mount a horse, or ever appear in a rowboat? Why does hemophilia largely affect males but is transmitted by women? Why is urine better to clean a cut than spit? Why was Descartes attracted only to women suffering from strabism? If moons are tidal, why is it not the case that women in the same hemisphere menstruate at the same time? The basic model for the *Playboy* centerfold, a weird combination for the American dream-need of both lewdness and innocence, is, according to critic Joan Acocella, a portmanteau: "On top is the face of Shirley Temple; below is the body of Jayne Mansfield."

Red camellias were what the demimondaines of the nineteenth century—*les horizontals*—carried when they had their periods. Mexican artist Diego Rivera, who weighed 350 pounds, had the face of a frog, and "Buddha" breasts, declared, "If I loved a woman, the more I loved her, the more I wanted to hurt her." The German theologian, Paul Tillich, was greatly aroused by a woman's feet. Was the poet Charles Baudelaire correct when he asserted that the sole pleasure of love lies in the knowledge that one is doing evil? Did passion feed on trouble? Was sin the aphrodisiac of sex? Poet Rupert Brooke, a female heartthrob, poetically referred to the "rough male kiss of blankets."

A Japanese *kaji*, or swordmaster, when tempering the steel of a sword not only undergoes ritual washings and maintains solitude, but is forbidden to make love, eat meat, or drink sake. No woman can visit the forge since there is a strong menstruation taboo. In Howard R. Garis's fables of Uncle Wiggly, was Nurse Jane Fuzzy Wuzzy, the muskrat lady housekeeper who lived in a hollow stump bungalow with the bachelor rabbit, his housekeeper, his secret wife, his mistress (she always, not insignificantly, made him wear his "rubbers" on a rainy day), or, for all her concerned and busy fussifications, his mother? Marlon Brando considered the job of acting an unmanly, and humiliating, and effeminate activity, worthless and *infra dig* as a profession. "We're housewives, we're these emotional creatures," he grizzled. "They say, "We're going to make you look good, just don't argue. Don't try to make the big decisions. Leave that to us. Leave that to the daddies, the husbands."

Why do female sharks have thicker skin than males? Why do warm alligator nests bring forth male alligators, cool nests bring forth female? Why do swans have penises, the only birds that do? Aren't animals in

general sexually odd? Why are doves monogamous? Why are porcupines only in heat for four hours a year? Why do albatrosses all spread their wings and point their bills toward the overhead sky during courtship? Why do prairie voles mate for life? If one dies its mate will not seek another. The seahorse is the only animal where the male carries the burden of pregnancy. Only a handful of animals, including hamsters, beavers, whales, and the two-faced sloth, have sex face-to-face. Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "The human body is the best picture of the human soul."

Eugene had all sorts of facts. They stuck in his head like currants in fruitcake. He found it intriguing that in newspapers and magazines the list of men's obituaries exceeded women's two to one; that 35 percent of the people who used personal ads for dating were already married; that the first toilet seat ever seen on television appeared on the subteen show *Leave It to Beaver*; that there are more conceptions in December (and more suicides in March) than in any other month; that one's "conception day"—the facts of one's conception—was infinitely more interesting than one's birthday; that the name *Obsession* is the most popular name for yachts in the United States.

What is being said in all of this?

And how strange, how spiritual, how stifling love itself could be! He himself had a deep, chronic, unreasoning, blind fear of thirteen or fourteen of fifteen-year-old girls: of their sarcasm, of their candor, of their recklessness, of their rapaciousness, their sullen bemusement, their insouciant ruthlessness, their dangerous flirtation, their sidelong glances, their entire Dionysian indefatigability. But there was more here, *more!* Was it Laura's effect on him? There was a no-holds-barred mode in young women today: sex, career, motherhood, sports, business. They are chrome, he felt. Shine. It is like a game with them today, getting what they want. Flash, rude, unreciprocating, provocative, cleavage-revealing tyros at age fourteen! It bewildered him. He could not even manage to explain it to himself! When does love begin in this country? Playing relievio? Musical chairs? Dodge ball? Surely long before the senior prom! In the seventh grade, being in the grip of first love—maybe the most dramatic romantic period in a young person's life—can literally make you ill. You wore big cordovans, dreamt in color, used gallons of tonic on your hair, and in the presence of a pretty girl would blush redder than a thousand suns. Excessive idealization of love has often led to an insupportable interdependence in the lives

of most couples that is positively stifling. The conclusion is obvious: lacking the oxygen of contact with the outside world, relations within a couple will thin and whither away. What does that say of the idea of love and the concept of freedom? No, what we want is often at direct loggerheads with what we dream, thought Eyestones. *Nadryv*, a very Russian thing. Pondering Laura's state of soul, he felt it was out of balance. One night he thought of what Giorgio de Chirico had written on his 1908 self-portrait: "*Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?*" And what am I to love if not the enigma?

It is not what you see, as Picasso said, but what you know is there. Eyestones, invoking intuition, a sympathy by which one transports oneself to the interior of a person or an object in order to coincide with its unique quality, decided to take the will for the deed. In a sad mood, he had been staring one night at his old beef-brown, mess-hall Army jacket, which, thrown over a dead radiator, evoked in memory the difference between the real and the ideal by a strange kind of what the old Dutch masters in another context called *stofuitdrukking*, the faithful rendering of fabric without which no painter could hope to be a success, for what that jacket meant by way of his recollection was not what it stood for. Memory subjectified objects just as experience taught. Recalling some lines of Fernando Pessoa's—"Who can see without sincere anguish / The coat in whose pockets the dead beggar kept his (now, forever absent) hands?"—Eugene wanted not only to see Laura but rather to see Laura and *care*. Since there should not be two failures, two total pessimists, having the same conversation, only because one party at least has to be positive, he assumed the practical role. When he did not get annoyed, which quite often he did, Eyestones—who craved affection but rarely could tolerate the way it was expressed, flattering the lover too often rather than the loved one—found himself like a bereavement educator diffidently saying to Laura, "I care for you, can't you see that? I do."

But did it matter? Eugene wondered. *Feel* belief, he told himself, *feel* belief, *feel* it. If the feeling was not there, could not at least the principle be? Was it not Matisse who told us that genius is a return to childhood? In his bewildered sorrow for her, a rolling pity, in the way that soap helps water to wet better, he told her, "You're precious to me." Is hyperbole always the refuge of the insincere?

Laura was missing a lot, but there was an old Vietnamese proverb Eugene had often heard: "You can't have both good water and good

mountains." He yearned to have a heart soft as Josiah the Ruler's and do the best he could with what he had in this state of unromantic exile. Wasn't the prophet Ezra devoted even in Babylon? Didn't Cornelius, although he was a circumcised Gentile, pray to the silent heavens in the belief that he would be answered? Didn't the foreigner Eliezer, a Syrian, do the same? Was it healthy or a loss of both moral and aesthetic distance to be free only to be a slave, so as to win her over to his side? To echo the thought of I Corinthians 9:22: "To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak"? Who then could assert that being a failure let us not be faithful? "My grace is sufficient for you," recalled Eyestones from II Corinthians 12:9, "for my power is made perfect in weakness." How could one be just if one is not humane? What did closeness mean if one was unaware of the small personal things that happened to those one is close to? Laura was not an object, but a subject. He had to keep seeing that, hoping that to see, to keep seeing, was to understand. "Stay awake," he told her. "Watch! Listen! Die knowing something! Our passage here on earth is so terribly brief." But she seemed never to listen. He knew why she did not listen. It was his very own fault. The truth was simply that he had not been kinder to her.

He found chaos when he was with her, but after so long who would not come to care for her, if only with the hope that she could find the strength to be on her own? It had always taken all his diacritical energies to discern what Laura was from what she was not, but eventually he had come to see in the light of a sudden hammering contrition that the self that knows is also the thing that it knows, and he was resigned to accept the sad fact that even by striving we cannot get at the naked reality of ourselves. Eugene began to wonder exactly when a curve forms a closed loop. When Laura's world started making sense, did the outside world somehow somewhere make less? Pity had transformed into caring, worry into a set of deeply felt wishes that Laura endure. He had tried, hard, becoming lost to phase space. In the inexplicable adsorption that defined their union, he had written letters to her, many letters, telephoned her often and had frequently given her gifts. One particular present was a solid silver perfume bottle on a necklace that he had had personally made for her in Tijuana by a talented old silversmith named Señor Antonio Espinosa, although it would eventually point to one of their worst misunderstandings they ever had. Laura was odd and irrational, always wandering around in the midst of a kind of mirage. As she was a person of defensive-

ness and fracture, why was it a surprise she was a person of intense jealousy? She sniped about Kate the typist. The office women. Even Harriet Trombone. She hated her, as she did most women. It was a disease. That time when driving through the town of Concord and he had pointed out Concord Academy and happened to mention in passing that beautiful Queen Noor of Jordan had gone to high school there—Laura refused to speak to him for the rest of the day—Eugene never forgot. She who even farcically went on record as insisting that Greta Garbo was *not* a pretty woman not surprisingly also burned with indignation at Eugene's admiration of long-dead silent-screen actress Louise Brooks. She had once found a valentine sent to him by way of the office from Spalatin's older sister—he had charitably lent her his umbrella one rainy afternoon—on which she had comically written "*Que besa su pies*," but although Laura knew out of hand that it was nothing more than that, she virtually lived to remind him of it. Again, because she believed in nothing, she believed in anything. People so aggressively resistant to the truth have only lies to play with in order to find solutions.

Every event created a new reality. Or did it create an old one? Repeatedly, Eugene asked himself why he stayed with her. Was it simply that she was what she was? What he knew he could be sure of it, even if by default? Wasn't that what is known as the Daniel Ellsberg Paradox, that because human beings so desperately prefer definite information over ambiguity, spooked from the need for order or the fear of complexity, they often make choices consistent neither with the laws of probability nor with themselves nor with their best interests?

Once when he had gone to San Diego for a month, free-lancing articles for a local rag of a newspaper there in order to earn money, he had mailed Laura a postcard from Tijuana, postmarked, or so she claimed, "Cuernavaca." After he had returned to Boston and she inquired whether he had in fact gone to Cuernavaca, and if so, why, Eugene, to exaggerate, told her he had gone everywhere in Mexico—and then, when pressed, laughing, told her the truth, that he had *not* gone to Cuernavaca. It had obviously been a postal error, said Eugene who at the best of times although he had a mistrust of constancy never lied. Or it was a city where the mail was franked. The more one explains to a woman, however, the more she feels she deserves to know. Or suspects. And despises. Anything private to her was shady. Somewhat irked, Laura reminded him that five days had passed that

particular week when she had not heard a word from him by mail or got a call. "I was in the middle of the Anza Borrego desert, writing an article," Eugene truthfully explained. There came a long pause, when iron entered into her soul. "Were you unfaithful in Cuernavaca?" she asked, pre-judgmentally refolding her arms and, obnoxiously counter-suggestible, regarding him with racing antagonism. "I wasn't *in* Cuernavaca," he said. "I will repeat. Were you in Cuernavaca is what I'm asking, and were you unfaithful?" If her presumptions about his *fidelity* to her irritated him, what about this nonsense? Although he owed her nothing, least of all fidelity, he nevertheless answered her by saying, "What are you trying to say?" "You didn't write to me," she said, challenging him with a hateful smile. "Did you write to anybody?" "Beside you?" he asked. "Yes." "No." Nor had he received any mail other than a simple postcard from Duxbak stating, "The egrets have appeared in Methuen." She waited in place, holding fast onto some kind of puerile doctrine. "What is this all about? Are you joking? Isn't it obvious that I could have been unfaithful *anywhere*," he said. "Tijuana, San Diego, Cap Roux, off Cannes, Camden, New Jersey, or on any of the thousand alkali dunes of a faraway desert as hot as an ignoramus in hell writing a love letter!" Laura would not agree. As silence meant infidelity to her simply because, by the kind of abracadabral reasoning that was typical of her, he had written her so often *before* from other places, she concluded by asking herself according to her own logic and in a moment of spectacular overreach why that would suddenly cease? Her nosiness gave her long nose the look of a shoehorn. "I think you're lying," she accused. "The truth is any lie you choose to say." "Or believe," he replied, "which is the point I am making." "If you had been faithful, you would have written," she said, trying to stare a hole through him in an attempt to spy treachery in him, which is what he suddenly suspected she herself needed as an exchange-principle to match what had to be her own guilt. Overstatement is a trope of the ill, thought Eugene, who declared, "More likely the reverse." He concluded that she was as either as stupid as the Himalayas or that it was not the insubmission of uncertainty but rather the deft reversal of blame to absolve herself of her very own deceit while he was away. What periodically seemed to be progress with Laura proved in the end always to be a series of regressive missteps that became a parody of advancement, in the same way, say, that three consecutive lefts make a right, leaving you perpetually tracing mad circles and finding yourself

ultimately right back where you started from. He was sure that while he had been away in San Diego she actually remembered him best by way of her own defaulting sins and that these inquiries of hers were all junk science and advocacy research. What nymph at her orisons tracks the measurements of fornication?

Eyestones thought of an old record of his: Fanny Brice singing one of the first songs she ever sang in public, "When You Know You're Not Forgotten by the Girl You Can't Forget," performing it at age 10 at Keeney's Theater in Brooklyn in 1901 and winning ten dollars plus three dollars in coins that admirers tossed onto the stage.

"I wrote to *you*," Laura piped up like a falsettist. "And your point is?" he asked her. "If you can say that," she grizzled, going on the assumption that the absence of evidence was not necessarily the evidence of absence, "you probably were unfaithful." Heat like glass is a liquid that continues to flow. Would this never end? Where was the end of it? Was it to be hour after hour after interminable hour or year after year after interminable year that he had to hear the same thing? He reflected unkindly that for her jealousy, she deserved her pain. Forget logic, forget truth, should not justice simply tame what mercy cannot? Laura refused to budge. She stood there as hard as cold cement, her mouth having narrowed into a hard cruel line. Her cheap dime-store glasses gave her the look of a somewhat comical figure. She remained there, staring at him with a vengeful scowl. "You know something?" said Laura. "I am going to keep that postcard from Cuernavaca all my life, always, *forever*, just to remind me of you." "Be careful," said Eugene. "It may remind you of yourself."

Who under the circumstances could see anything clearly? It was chaotic, all of it.

A forest of screws. It was a labyrinth of traps, bolts, eyelets, nails, clips, and screws, all scattered. Part of a puzzle. Try someday to dismantle the car door of a Mercedes to probe and fix the window glass in order to see. Impossible. Laura was exactly like that herself, he thought. No wonder that he was as confused and confounded as he was almost stone blind. Couples—marriages, relationships, etc.—perpetually needed another point of view to settle crises, as did the U.S. government, which without a saving third political party always ended up with the immutable gridlock of political intransigence, endless standoffs, lack of consensus, bicameral stupidity, stifling delays, no end of wasted money and lost time.

It was in such ways that she had contributed to his magazine columns, both by omission and commission—in ways she never knew, it was true—for sex and love and desire and lust and adultery and perversity totally fascinated her. It seemed that they were the only subjects in this lifetime that did. He had always known at a certain point he could no longer justify using her in those cross-shot five-banked billiards-like ways, and now he knew that time had come. It was his determination, flat out, never to see Laura again. She was contra-angled like a dental tool and shaped to probe by her very form. She had no approval to offer, so damaged was she. She badly resented her own emotional dependence upon Eyestones and hated him for it, and he now could see that. Was it all aligned to her father? Could he believe that she had been paternally intervened upon? She who not only had never made any final decisions herself but who also had more finales than Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* could not understand Eugene's persistent loyalty, which is why, he saw, she could not, would not, accept it. Rapunzel had nothing to do with this. Laura had seemed a mystery to him from that very first moment they met that day at the train tracks beneath the arcades of the dark old Boston Garden, a rainy afternoon under a low, black, threatening sky streaked with odd shadows right out of a black-and-white Brassaï photograph, when, after having telephoned him out of the blue, she had then taken the slow train down from Newburyport to Boston and disembarked with that mad crooked half-smile, that brown rat-nibbled hair and thin, moon-pale face looking dangerous, neurotic, and inexact. It would be a day of crucial significance, a day of regret, a day of forgiveness, so much so that Eyestones remembered the date. It had taken place on October 22, portentously, he thought, one of the only two days—the other being February 22—that the sun in faraway Egypt entered Abu Simbel. It was Laura who within the very first hour of meeting him suggested, by way of inviting herself, that she stay over his house. "I'll telephone my mother in Newburyport and tell her I'll stay here," said Laura, pleading. And he relented.

Eugene Eyestones, who after several eye operations managed to see twenty colors in the spectrum—most people could see six or seven—relented. He relented because he felt sad and pitied her. He relented because he cared. He relented because he was weak. He relented because she could not fashion a face to frighten the world with. He relented because he wanted to keep his foot from evil, as we are encouraged in Proverbs 4:27. He relented because he knew that every

hypochondriac has a fatal disease. He relented because he saw that the asthenic was her aesthetic. He relented because her cold silences were disclosures of pain, and silence is the way learning works for the grace to hear. He relented because her former boyfriend, being cruel, probably beat her, and he realized that if you paint red under blue, blue is bluer. He relented because he has seen women and children cut in half by Huey gunships. He relented because she seemed so unthinkably alone. He relented because, as he surveyed the world, since nothing made sense, he figured anything could. He relented because some dunce wrote a book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* when the fact remains—literally, ethically, theologically—there are no good people, for we are all sinners and wretches in need of grace. He relented because he was a weak person himself.

He remembered how when he first met Laura she vulgarly fumbled and snatched through her purse, rattling through the contents in that faux Gucci knockoff that she had carried to try to find the telephone number she was too new a visitor on the East Coast to have memorized, and he felt an instant pity. Eyestones, whose eye had been momentarily caught by that particular Gucci ornament, recalled as he waited while she telephoned how he had begun to reflect on all the vagina boxlets commercially used and how with keen insight the poet and monk Thomas Merton had once explained how in advertising, negatively, we are all of us seduced by being convinced we need things we do not. Were they not in fact cloven images, hooves, squeeze zones? Chevrolet signs, B. F. Goodrich. Edsel grilles. McIlhenny's Tabasco. Heinz 57 Varieties. B & M beans. Three Diamonds. The labels themselves. Slits, slots. We are wooed by the temptation—drawn by the aperture—to open the door. Ask and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you.

No, it was strange. As Eugene came closer to Laura, in the process he also came to pity her and to worry for her and to commiserate with her—she seemed so ill used—all of which inevitably fell under the head of "imperfect necessity," where, fatefully, he committed the crime of getting involved with someone in order to avert the greater disaster that he believed would occur, so lost she was, so sad, of her dying of loneliness or total despair. When it is not passion, it is almost always pity that is an excuse for love.

Who was Laura Warholic? That was never clear. She was in a sense an orphan, a foundling, a "paper daughter." With missing par-

ents, her life was hers to invent—or to waste. She had done both in a pragmatopia of lies, dodges, escapes. She captivated people by need. Dependence. Even drama. Especially drama. *Schellkwork.* High organ swells. To help her, if and where he could, was fine, but even after a long time knowing her he saw in a real sense he knew only by what she was *not.* An empty circle. A zero. A wide crater by which alone we deduce a fallen bomb. A cipher, a circle, enclosing emptiness by the very same ring-line that in a loop excluded a world. He knew her only obliquely, the way leopards love the cat's-pee scent of Michaelmas daisies. She reminded him of mythological Eurydice, of whom we know nothing—no facts, no fables, no force. The size of Orpheus's passion is the sole index of the woman's worth. It is only when she dies that we get a glimpse solely by the depth of his love for her, of not so much what she is as what she really could be. He had felt it almost all the time he was with her. He had tried ignoring her. It was easy. But the passion that he felt in his love for Rapunzel was a nagging need that became only more demanding the more it was denied, just as it was for Proust who according to legend would drive away all his loves through the unreasonable demands of his they could never fulfill. He felt the need to help her by dint of her need and dependence. Blindness. In a hot-air balloon race, it is always the balloon on the bottom that has the right-of-way. The solution of the problem they faced he saw in the vanishing of the problem, and the vanishing of the problem was paramount.

There was no context of decisiveness in her, but like a thrown shadow it put him in the dark as well, and he never knew when relating to her whether to succeed he should simulate the strength of the oak, evoking justice, or adopt the suppleness of the ash, something like mercy. Recovery is a process, he knew, not an event. But where was the cure? Wasn't it time to rectify a wrong and fully to be rid of her, he asked himself, as he drove back along those endless night roads to Massachusetts and, pondering how we can correct the uncorrected—would it be homeopathically helpful or only add blindness to blindness?—he recalled lines from the nursery rhyme "Alexander's Song," also known as "A Man of Double Deed":

> There was a man of Thessaly
> And he was wondrous wise.
> He jumped into a quick-set hedge

And scratched out both his eyes;
And when he saw his eyes were out,
With all his might and main,
He jumped into another hedge,
And scratched them in again.

Could he redeem the time? Hadn't he already wasted too much time already trying to advise her? Wasn't sentiment only a prophylactic against thought? Thought against action? Action against conscience? Conscience against judgement?

Nagging at Eyestones constantly was the insistent question of what he should do with her. Although he badly wanted to be shut of her or, better, to see her situated elsewhere and productive—don't they have a saying in Italy that anything temporary becomes permanent?—he came to see not without shock and no small amount of self-analysis that in all the surprising and unprepared-for stops and starts she presented, fizz hard upon fermata, very like trying to sing, say, the venerable American hymn "Old Hundredth" with its unpredictable rhythm, it was her *weaknesses* that had attracted him in ways her strengths had not! Such an effect on him reminded him of the false way the musical score of a brainless film with its rising diapason forces one to feel, pushing the moviegoer into various emotional directions he would otherwise not have taken, that is if he had stayed in the theater in the first place. It was a deep source of worry to him that too often he could sympathize with everything he could pity and identify with whatever touched him. Depression is anger, but in empathizing with Laura, what of anger or depression or of both had he himself been infected by? She had lied to him, of course, as invariably one does to people whom one mistrusts and on whom one feels so dependent. But had not he lied to himself by way of the self-deluded messianism that he had adopted, convinced out of hubris that he would straighten her out? Was his surveillance of her only voyeurism? A dephlogistication of real care? Oddly, sponging off him, she slowly and imperceptibly began to share the vectors of his destiny, as he did hers, which again could be traced, much of it, back to his own para-messianic predisposition to help unfortunates. Was there not in Spain the custom, to prevent illness, of people jumping over fires? He had jumped not over but *into* them! And yet how tragic in consequence was it that pity was all he could offer. Was not pity itself a kind of violence, merely the tem-

porizing side of true empathy? It was with added sense of misery that Eugene here recalled with unease that dark day in Utah when, having to listen to Laura's gratuitous racist insults about Snow, he began for the first time to have really violent thoughts against her, dark impossible thoughts that mercifully abated when, thankfully, he came under the salvific Good Friday spell of Bach's fifteenth *Goldberg Variations* that he happened to hear when twiddling the radio dial—a miracle itself in the static of the desert—as they drove through the night. What lubricant he spilled came only from his soul. How weak, how inefficient, he thought, but her tears were running down his heart long after they had died in her eyes.

The vice of pity is the very pity at the heart of it. Whom we would wish to love but cannot itself creates both rue and contrition in the remorseful heart. Acquaintance softens prejudice. Insight fabricates mercy. Mercy is what matters to fight the murderous heart. Who was it that said the best way out was always through?

XXXIV
Exile in Guyville

After Eugene and Laura had returned from the coast, there was not so much no affection between the two anymore as she seemed to disappear. It had been weeks since he had seen her. It was a period when Laura started going to local clubs, hoping to be picked up. She would sit alone at a table drinking coffee or beer, intently pretending to scratch notes on a pad, her mind a cubist essay of bewilderment: lonely, homely, confused, desperate, repressing years of anger, feigning to look busy, then, sad, rubbernecking around with a woodpecker's profile, nodding to various guys, her loopy, overlipsticked smile as wide as a cowcatcher, yearning to connect with someone, anyone, in spite of the fact that she was still telling Eugene that she loved him. All the hints of her unsettled attitude on their trip seemed to point to this sexual restlessness. ("Welcome back," said Duxbak, greeting Eyestones at work. "I got your postcard." He took it out and read, "'I am not sure if I know less about what interests me more than she knows more about what seems to interest her less.' Meaning?" "We were incompatible," replied Eugene.) Laura was not fussy. She could not afford to be. Although she had spent a full decade and a half of her life doing exactly nothing but look for a man, she still had not found one, not one, in any case, that she ever spoke about with approval, having dated mainly parking attendants, bike messengers with rings in their ears, large-ball bowlers, tarot therapists, protohominids, moral bindlestiffs, sad scrun-

ges, strangers on trains, and, the way he got it, more than a man or two in the shadowy doorways of Point Barrios or Tapachula, Guatemala. She had now developed an almost predatory attentiveness for rock singers, an addiction to inner-circle action that was now typical of her. The rabbit is dinner for every creature on earth, thought Eugene, including serpents. Rumors at the office had it that Laura, who had been seen about, had seemed to change drastically—all that slumming in the local bars and clubs. "I suppose it is better than stripping at the Two O'Clock Lounge or knocking back brewskis at a bar with some hairy spot-welder named Bluto or Cheech," said Eyestones to Mutrux one morning at Monsky's. "I saw the same old tired shit back there in San Francisco," said Mutrux, "where she was trying on her new punk persona, trying to look like Siouxsie but in the end resembling only a banshee. I predict she'll end up at a place like Totaljew's here, slinging hash."

There were the solemn overtones of a farewell when the two of them parted, a twilightish regret, something of a "Cherry Orchard"mood for a week or so, when a regime of defiant formality eventually gave way to an exhilarating rush of freedom for him. The new focus did not make her a changed woman, only a resolved one.

She had now taken to wearing small red-framed granny-glasses, round ones with wire rims, along with pointless wristlets of leather, and with her mountain of hair she began to look like Joey Ramone in drag. To Eugene it was only one more instance in her life of "identity theft." He was convinced that at the bottom of her every new enthusiasm was a new person who engendered it. A new person, another fascination. Eugene was almost certain that she had met someone else. Had he prevision? Some kind of extraretinal vision or "eyeless sight" growing out of his indisposition? Could not near-blindness trigger episodes of psi-phenomena? There is matter in manner. To him Laura was not clever enough to hide such a thing, surreptitious though she might try to be. He had always been able to read her moves. She was heedless and rash and indiscriminate with men in the same way that hunger deprives a bird of caution. Was there dermoöptic sight by feel? She had always revealed it in the way she acted—and even in what she did not, could not, disclose. She was probably waiting to be sure that whomever it was proved to love her. Why? He believed that in the end no one ever leaves someone for no one. Believing is more than anything else a mirror. And what he suspected she was doing he had often

seen before. Who was it now that had entered her life? Discknickers? Doubtful. Mutrux? Not again. Someone new. A record-shop obscuro, no doubt. A guitar player. Maybe some strolling picaro? Who knew. Why bother to pry? Thank God I have eyes of stone was his only thought. Eyestones went about his business and was only deeply grateful for the final sanctuary of his sudden, comforting solitude, feeling high, alive, hopeful, renewed, with the kind of lightness in his heart he felt on a bright springtime morning, and when he thought of Laura's decision to start a new life with a new companion, whoever it was—up pip and tabor! Bang nakers! Blast sackbuts! Blow the chalumeau!—he was almost tempted to laugh out loud.

Concomitant with a new sense of freedom from Laura, inevitably, came thoughts again, so easily summoned, of Rapunzel, she of the golden hair, but this time there was a low presentiment of something being wrong, something he could not see, something he could not quite name. As to who the person or persons it was that Laura was seeing, he did not care. He was quite certain that it was not Discknickers, who seemed to Eyestones too vain, too cool, and much too indifferent for any of that now. The Black Eagle had been as casual as always when, greeting him with bonhomie at the office after he returned from his cross-country trip, he tapped without missing a beat into his single obsession, "Salutations, Electrical Engineering! How is the weary traveler! When driving across America did you happen to drive through"—he hyperneurotically had the selected towns on the tip of his tongue!—"Mount Zion, New York? Aronsburg, Louisiana? Solomon, Kansas? Irving, Texas? Altman, Georgia? Altheimer, Arkansas? Kaufman County, Texas? Mayer, Arizona? Levy, New Mexico? Newman, California?"

One Saturday morning, as a favor, Eugene dropped off Harriet Trombone, who had no car, at an A & P supermarket near Memorial Drive—he waited for her—and while loading her groceries, both of them happened to see Jamm the Wesort coolly jiving, bopping, walking along the footpath on the Cambridge side of the Charles River. "Rumor has it that that dude—isn't that the current term?—is tight with Laura," said Eugene, snapping his fingers. "One of the brothers."

"And your point is, Whitey?"

"Do you know him?"

She smiled, frowning, looking at him in a critical squint as if facing

into the hot sun. Her skin a delicate coffee color, amber, her body slim and attractive, beautifully modeled and graciously proportioned.

"*Excuse you*?"

"Ever meet him?"

"What is this, Negroes 'R' Us?" she asked. "We all on the same page? Aboard the same bus? I'm supposed to know every passing brotherman and *femme de couleur* projectin' down the damn highway, nitwit? Thaaat's right, the Zulu Bush tribe meets in my kitchen every Thursday with all the dicty Nee-groes—we aaaaall in line! Eatin' mongoose and zebra soup! Wanna hippo sangwich? Or some boiled pig's-feet and sippin' liquor in Ghetto Alley? Or a mess of chitlins boiled with scallions dipped in flour and fried up over a dung fire? Good stuff, you mean, like leavin's from the use-it-up, put-it-on, make-it-last days of Mister Ronald Raygun and his trickle-down economics? We never saw the trickle, but we down, all right! *We down*!" Harriet moved up into his face. "Never mind the quality, feel the width, right? What jive. You tryin' to play the deuces with me? Tell you why, 'cause I ain't never heard such shit!"

"No, Harriet—"

"No Harriet, nothin'!"

A frenetic pulsating beat characterized her every sentence. She could be rude, tough, forward. "When all of you white crackers who, as we speak, occupy *with armies* more than half the world, subjugated and stole Africa and all the Americas, up and down, plus Canada, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, the Caribbean? The Thirteenth Amendment, my ass!" Her tongue went racing on like a river in spate. "Don't play the jive with me, mister man, OK? Whitey knows and cares nothin' about African-American men, their sorrow, their fears, the way that they're emasculated, the abuse they take, the pain they feel, working on low-life jobs in the honky world where they're reduced to *nothing*—no wonder they come home to their women with rage in their hearts, uncontrollable rage, and take it out on them! It's a crime and an outrage and a SIN! You have no idea how inferior you make us feel every day, how small, how useless, how not worth anything even though we all of us know—I have written about it!—that it's you honkys who should go back to that hell-hole of Europe where God intended your asses to die of the plague in the first place, you people who during those Civil Rights demonstrations used to arrest us not for breaking windows or throwing stones but, are you ready for this?"—with both

hands on her hips, she aimed closely into his face with her scolding little head wagging side to side—"'incommoding,' blocking a damn sidewalk. *Incommoding*, I love that word!" She got into the car, stifling a smirk, and slapped his knee, hard. "You just don't get it, do you? Can't you people in this country that you stole from the Indians—oh sorry, I mean discovered, like I should 'discover' your house tomorrow?—can't you ever understand that no matter where we people of color happen to go"—this said with a series of sharp, staccato taps on Eyestones's knee—" that We. Never. Feel. Accepted? Which is what you can't comprehend. Isn't that why on every penny that black man can be seen hanging by his throat? Don't say no! Look closely on the back of the penny in the center of that building!"

"The Lincoln Memorial?"

"Whatever you want to call it, he's there! He's a symbol of all you've done to us. So kumbaya this, white man!" snapped Harriet, ready with her practiced spiel. "What we *do* plan, Mr. Double E, is to get your white-showin', God-hoggin', gold-thievin', mad-dog cheatin', trouble-stewin', land-grabbin', pope-obeyin', God-forsaken, disease-spreadin', black-hatin', slave-drivin', hell-deservin', wrong-God-worshippin', culture-missin', self-deceivin', ass-in-the-air prayin', table-turnin', fat overseer domineerin' asses out of here! Remember, human meat tastes best with Congo beans! Let's play pin the tail on the cracker!" She bonked his knee. "Don't shoot 'til you see the whites of their skin!"

Eugene laughed and, driving out of the parking lot, asked Harriet while they were out what other errands she had to do. "Anything else you need?"

"Where that Chink napalm at?"

One day Eyestones bumped into Laura who was riding her bike in Central Square and took her to the Stone and Cone for ice-cream. They took their cones and slipped quickly outside after spotting Mickey ("Mouse") Mewlingshaw who, typically obtuse, never unaware of his unattractiveness, boastfully walked up to Eugene and, nudging him, said, "Guess what, I'm going over to Sanders Theater at Harvard tonight to try to meet Nelson Mandela. Guy's giving a talk. I walked over to the president's house earlier today and left a personal note asking to take him to dinner. Hope he responds."

There was a slight intonation of mauve or purple on Laura's hooded lids and a new forefinger ring. Her hair was washed a strange gooseberry tint. She brought up the subject of insolvency, which only gave

her the chance once again arbitrarily to bite the ankles of her father as well as to criticize her roommates for the luck they both recently had in meeting generous guys. Walking her back to her flat, Eugene asked her point blank, "What about a job?"

He was pushing her bike and stopped. "Come again?"

Eugene recalled once having seen a scrap of paper by the telephone in her flat: *Memo to self: look into possibilities of being a 'creative interior painter'—fashion illustration. Ambience improvement.*

"Work."

"Oh, didn't I tell you. I got one." Jauntily, Laura fake-rhumba'd in sarcastic delight.

"What?"

"I got one, I got a job!"

Blinking, he looked at her.

She then sing-songed, "It's Op-po-site Day!"

He wearily shook his head.

"Money's so important to you."

"How can you say that? It's ridiculous. I only want to see you independent. Money is about freedom, liberty, not possession. Or should be."

"Freedom," she sneered. She took her bike.

"Right."

She shrugged. "I knew a lot of women in San Francisco who called themselves sex-workers. They were proud of it. They were free." Eugene said nothing. "It's a job, right?" Eugene said nothing. "They don't even have to pay taxes."

"What about the fact of their selling and polluting their bodies?"

"Oh Jesus, that is *so* yesterday! Don't be such a herbert. Anyway, I was half-joking. I've thought of being a hostess at a club or some kind of promoter. Meeting people. You never know. Have some fun. Hear music. I could get business cards."

"A *promoter*?" asked Eugene, amazed. Had she pulled that one out of the air? To him it was only another one of her tectonic shifts of mood. She was truly blind as a knee. "I always put such jobs in the category of mimes!" he said. "Balloon sculptors! Lawyers! People whose brains could easily fit into the overhead bin of a Piper Cub." *Why not a proctodaelist?* thought Eugene, shaking his head.

"I'm taking no more jobs in an office. Fuck that! No more of that bullshit for chump change. No more sitting in a cubicle," she said, trot-

ting out her usual spiel about corrupt corporate types and constipated businessmen. Her eyes flickered with a strange light like fire about to break out in the brown irises, and she became saucy and unhelpful. "There is a big market for medical *un*-knowledge in the health field, people hired by fat cats who've got a lot to lose. Ever hear of 'hormesis'? A little extra radiation improves human health? Sure!"

Eugene resented himself for holding it against her that she wasn't a flautist or an epidermiologist or an explorer. "You like New York."

"I lived in Queens."

"Why not get a loft in TriBeCa and wear tribal jewelry and join a class of Couples Styling Therapy and give spoon-bending parties or get into Seventies retro dancing or sign up for 'What You Can Feel, You Can Heal' seminars or take up with a twenty-three-year-old sculptor who will teach you to thumb clay and fire kilns?" he sarcastically offered.

She looked unfalteringly into his eyes like the seductress Kundry and said, "Or a fifteen-year-old one."

It was a cold standoff for a minute there. Eugene remembered only the day before, rolling a pen about in his fingers, looking sadly, thoughtfully, out the window, and then swiveling around to mutter to Duxbak, "I hate myself for not loving Laura." *Remind me who I am again*, he thought. The Pied Piper of Hamelin. *Rattenfänger.*

He carried her bicycle up the stairs into her small foyer. *Keep The Door Lachted.* And she invited him upstairs. She always had odd musical taste and, again, Eugene now saw that had seemed to change, drastically. A large poster of Iggy Pop, naked on the floor with a microphone, had gone up on her wall. Down had come a previously cherished photograph of timeless and eternal Yanni hammering on his pianola, with his treacly mustache and atrocious titillating hair and bouncing vulgarity and sound and light. Gone were her LPs of Zamfir, Master of the Pan Flute, and John Tesh's cornhusker flamenco. It was not astonishing to see bold alterations in her over the next few weeks, merely the unexpected surprise of her going out of her way to reveal them. All of the endless cosseting she once needed in the face of rejection seemed no longer required. Whereas once she never finished books, now she never even looked at them anymore but only listened to music through earphones wherever she went, her large crocodile mouth contorted as, mouthing various lyrics, she would shout out, "Awesome!" or "So trippy!" or "Farfuckinout!" He would always re-

member that one April 19th morning at Lexington Green when, during the historic re-enactment of Colonel Parker's engagement with the British, out of the blue, she dropped kitsch as if overnight and adopted a new rock persona.

With a new and laughable pretentiousness, she now damned the city of Boston for being duller than New York City, an attitude, as she complained of it, that while it added to her already negative personality, made her seem frankly hipper, at least in her own mind, although her experience of New York City had been confined, the short version made clear, to several years of true insignificance and grinding isolation in outlying Astoria, riding those loud, clacking trains into downtown Manhattan in the morning and back at night without so much as a single friend. Most young people who go to New York looking for freedom experience isolation but do not care. They crave the bohemian life, where insignificance is not so much a sign of failure as an aspect of fun. They are often young women seeking to prolong the period when they can take chances, make mistakes, experiment with sex without any pressure for them to marry, be unpredictable, and avoid any traps of consequence or finality. It is all of it a way of *avoiding* plans. New York is full of quixotes on this kind of leave of absence, of people with a feeling for the tangential adventure, the risk exploit, an interlude that is not likely to end in any double-ring ceremony.

Was it in this mood, for Boston was only another new city to her, that Laura now yearned to explore, to be daring, to be accepted? Eugene had not a clue. She began frequenting the Club Bohemia in Somerville and going into Boston to both the Rat on Commonwealth Avenue and O'Brien's to hear rock, but more than anything she sought to ingratiate herself among the rock indigines of Central Square, an area in which she spent most of her time in spite of Eyestones's witty dismissal of it as nowhere. "'The square is dead,'" he told her, quoting Buckminster Fuller. Her full-glaze "fixation complex" about men, no matter how she tried to hide it from Eugene, her driving, almost violent and insatiable body-urge for imaginary love-objects like rock stars Evan Dando or Jeff Beck or John Lennon or, who knew, some zither player from Sonic Youth, reminded Eugene in its tight grip on her of nothing less than a kind of grim alien colonization, almost as if she had been physically taken over, replaced, literally *inhabited* by a sort of duppy, some cracked zombie, dead to ambition, brainlessly instructed to walk around stiffly in a state of clockwork sloth. She had

skin hunger. At times, she seemed truly possessed. He had seen warnings of this before in the way she ogled guys at the beach, muttering, "I love Drakkar," or drooling over magazine photographs of suntanned gianlorenzos in tight bathing suits or staring at clowders of young businessmen in crisp white shirts and ties in sharp tailored suits who had just stepped out of advertisements. It was not strange perhaps to see someone her age in the fatal grip of fanboy ecstasy, smelling androstadienone in the air, the male scent, cooing and grinning like a kind of drugged puppet, only bizarre that she showed no interest to hide it.

It was a period in Laura's life, as Eyestones told Duxbak, when the Vietnamese would have said she was beyond *doi moi tu duy*—renovation, new thinking. She continued spending endless nights in squid-dark joints in and around Central Square such as the Middle East or the Green Street Grill or the House of Blues in Harvard Square, sitting in a booth with a sob in her smile and as bony as death slouched over a drink, pretending to write and even occasionally doing so in that thumbed and ratty notebook of hers that she kept at hand like a Dane his bicycle, hoping to look intellectual and deep—or at least literary—trying to hoop herself with a bit of luck into some kind of "cool" conversation with any of the unrighteous so in her opinion extra-musicalized molongs there, arena popsters, meat mothers, insolent punies, mosh-heads, cocoonists in grotty shoes, meth chefs, evil bunnies, social cancels, filthy Nosferats, mopey zydecorators, bug-eyed underpopsters, mindless stoners, fag-bashers, foo-foos, paroled gangbusters, leathersexuals, doog fathers, über-losers, peodeiktophiles, prodigious fuck-ups, pale, nail-biting plorophiles, and last-bastion undiscouragable Strawberry Fields fanatics for whom nothing was real, all of whom strangely seemed to share a similar type of body structure. She especially loved going to places where there was no proscribed audience/performer separation, which made it easy for her to meet the musicians, mostly greasy-haired punks half-tweaked after weeklong speed binges and upwired, atrabilious louts with leather wristlets who without a word of introduction made unnatural suggestions to her. One guy with a collapsed speedfreak face getting off his drum stool at the end of a set said to her, "Wanna play zoo? I want to caress your head. Walk on me bare."

On certain afternoons, Laura wandered over to the Slightly Red Bookshop for coffee, where she sat in a corner for hours flipping through Marxist magazines. Eyestones had heard of the lost, semi-

submarine life she was now living and, through the grapevine, that she was dating morlocks. He ruminated with pity on it. But who was he to cluck at her? What had he to boast of? Was a sin of despair worse than one of overweening pride? He remembered how when he was young he used to think in mad bouts of grandiosity how he was the only person on earth truly alive, or awake, or at least sentient, idly daydreaming even as early as those unmomentous days sitting at his first- and second- and third-grade desks with who knows what kind of neomystical self-delusion that he alone of all the other inchlings gathered there would one day be called on to do something important and indeed dynamic. He was a moonstruck-child, convinced of having a uniqueness that to him seemed as natural as breathing. When he was a little boy riding along in a car with his dad, he often felt—quite seriously—that people should be bowing. *People should be bowing?* What was that all about? And of course it never came true.

Laura's desire for attention was extreme in spite of her own shyness, because what embarrassed her oddly enough actually goaded her on at the same time and mysteriously merged with her psycho energy and queerly became a blessing. Her sitting there pretending to be writing but really trying to meet guys, like the use of certain veils and garments, only seemed an obstacle, when in fact it was a morbid expression of her lust, putting on a display like some kohl-eyed houri by what she modestly pretended to cover up. An opportunity in short was made of an obstacle. No one not odd does not hide in order to reveal herself.

Her jittery self-consciousness, her mockery of almost everything that had ever hurt her, an unhappiness that was mistaken for insolence, endowed her in a lost, ragged way with a certain punk attraction while she flitted about like a Barbary macaque. Eyestones found less and less to like in her, thinking that if she had any value in her heart, it was covered like gangue around a mineral and hidden from any hope of seeing it. Anyone's attention flattered her, and she gave out her telephone number with abandon, like some roving promiscatrix, except that she was torn between wham-bam intercourse and mooing, fantastical dreams of an automatic and sea-deep pair-bonding that would never end. She was as earnest as ever, of course—whatever was written with irony, she usually quoted without it—and at times more boring than lint, but she was now working to change that from the outside. She began mentioning people in casual conversation with names like B-Real

and Scar and Dimebag and Balso and Stereoman and once a singer named Nancy Mrocek, Ph.D. She read with undisguised delight about gay hustlers who sold their bodies like Johnny Thunders and Jim Carroll and Dee Dee Ramone, gay hustlers who could do nothing wrong with her as long as they were musicians. She went to local gigs and pursued sixth-tier celebrities and looked at photos of big-hair groups and spoke with admiration of inane clothes-desperados and scarved slam-poets and made moist observations like, "I thought he was the perfect singer because he was weird-looking" and "Iggy Pop rules!" and "The New York Dolls considered bisexuality part of their vision." As she spoke, Eugene could almost see her words take on the visual form in inane radulations of comic-book art. "Fascinating," Eugene would say, listening to her now with only a declining lack of attention. She would ask, "Would you swap two Rectum is the Grave tickets for an ounce of pot?" ""Hear 'Strange Loop' from the Liz Phair CD 'Exile in Guyville' yet?" "Do you think Beth Orton would have lunch with me?" "I know it sounds loco but, like, when the Violent Femmes who to me are deep sing,

'Meet me in my hotel room
Oh, meet me just for fun
And you will not be boring
Something you been storing
Inside to show someone like me'

I think they're singing to me."

It was the old story. Rock 'n' roll guys, usually dorks, rarely got girls at school, and so they learned to play the guitar. Suddenly, they began getting girls, pop tarts, older devotees like Laura. An entire transformation took place. The more successful they got, they had to trade up in girls in the looks department, which meant trading down in anything that was worthwhile that was in them and dumping fans like Laura who were left defending the very people they should have despised and becoming instead morbid little no-hopers.

It was a curious phenomenon that Laura herself never took drugs, or at least hard drugs, but she was forever teaching grandma how to suck eggs on that subject, for Eyestones had seen terrible abuses that way in the military out in the ramparts of Southeast Asia. Although she had no daring herself, she developed what seemed a new fascina-

tion for crack-meth boneheads and speed freaks and narcoleptic heroin heads and thin dopeoids. "Patti and Robert lived at the Chelsea," Laura would say—her new hip revelations were always spoken with a jaunty faux-homeboy mien—or "Punk is groovy" or "Heroin makes your eyes spikes, really tiny. When you do blow, your pupils get huge."

"That's almost interesting," said Eugene.

One cold morning with the sun spangling through the trees and the maples golden bright and the leaves of the ginkos turning chartreuse, Eyestones saw Harriet Trombone hanging her laundry and flashing the line forward. Seeing him, she took two clothespins out of her mouth and smiled. "That thin number used to come by here?" She held up a clothespin and tapped her temple with it. "Don't *she* bang the rails! And, honey, that ain't all. I seen her the other day outside a Central Square joint on Lawrence Street with the ugliest-assed no-account white man on the planet, which, lemme tell you, is goin' some!"

"No work today?" taunted Eugene, laughing.

"I got Columbus Day off. They do that in this country for every criminal, Whitey?"

Laura also began going to movies a lot. Movies preserved her moral slumber the way dreams are said to preserve our sleep. Eugene found her choices awful. He went with her several times. One time she left behind in a bar somewhere the eyeglasses she occasionally wore, and he bought her a new pair—"round owl ones," she said she wanted. "Purple ones."

"Like the Byrds wore?"

"Who?"

"I forgot. That was before your time."

But even buying her a pair of glasses caused an argument. "You get me a pair of eyeglasses, fine, then you refuse to go to any of these films with me."

"I go. I do go."

"What, twice?"

He asked with astonishment, "Why? To see *The Night Porter*—with you watching it for the fiftieth time?"

Laura, who as he knew had not heard of, never mind valued, any film prior to around 1968, suggested with characteristic smugness that it might be the best movie ever made, although she was always dropping Godard's name. "The greatest movie?" He shrugged. "I myself might nominate Louis Feuillade's *Barrabas*," said Eugene. "Or his *Fan-*

tômas, 1913. Or old Metro's *Sherlock, Jr.*, starring Buster Keaton. Some believe it is Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear*, others J.-P. Melville's *Les Enfants Terribles, Citizen Kane, 8½, All About Eve, Casablanca*—"

"Who's Foo-Yod? Some chink?" she asked, who tended only to like movies that confirmed what she felt.

Eugene spelled out the French name for her. "I should take you to see his serial, *Les Vampires*—nineteen installments." Although she was a bit of a film prig, Laura's knowledge was localized, and she had never heard of Feuillade or Franju or Clouzot or De Sica. She preferred renting contemporary videos and boring Eyestones rigid watching no end of celluloid messes, big favorites of hers, such as *Red Rock West* and *Slacker* and *Pulp Fiction*. She never mentioned *The Lady Vanishes* or saw *Eyes without a Face* or rented *Nights of Cabiria* or enjoyed *Pandora's Box* or heard of *Les Enfants du Paradise*.

"What about the time you took me to see that flip 1930s movie, I forget the name, when right in the middle of it you weirded out and we had to leave?"

"*Star of Midnight*, 1935."

"I looked at you like, *duh*."

"I told you about my tropism for order."

"So you had to walk out?"

"It's true. And I apologized."

It had been embarrassing in a way. Eyestones, who had always loved to go to old Thirties movies, chose that night for no other reason. *Star of Midnight*, starring William Powell and Ginger Rogers, he enjoyed for all its sunburst doors, old bottle-openers, fat black telephones-with-operator-mouthpieces, bulbous cars ornamented with stylish speed-lines, and men sporting Adolph Menjou-mustaches wearing Borsalinos, large, heavy topcoats with deep patch-and-flap pockets, along with women wearing small, shallow-crowned hats with doo-dads and coats fashioned with cape collars and cartridge pleats, padded shoulders, and machine stitching and carrying triangular pocketbooks, a wonderful past when people fixed drinks with dashes of Vichy water and raised their glasses and said, "Bottoms up!" and "Here's how!" and used odd verbal tics and out-of-date terminology like "Swell" and "It's a cinch" and "Much obliged" and "I'm all in" and "He's a good scout" and "Stop gallivanting" and "Don't be a mug" and "You can lick 'em" and in every conversation using the word *say* before each remark or response, in the same way that nowadays almost everybody in

this country never falls to start a sentence—in answering a question as if by rote always quirkily and lamely—with the word *well*, a colloquial twitch that, by comic pact, Eugene and Laura sought to avoid. Except that in this film, driving Eyestones perfectly crazy, every time anyone lit a cigarette—and smoking is rampant in every scene of the movie—he or she without a second's thought would throw the used match or butt on the *floor!* Powell. Ginger. Paul Kelly. They all did it. All the time. Butts. And matches. On the *floor. In rooms!* Eyestones groaned each time, it was so distracting and disorderly. So they left.

"It's not only that. You don't bother trying to . . . to *feel* a film," Laura complained further. "What, are you some kind of snob?"

Eugene looked at her and remarked, "I don't think a person should 'feel' about a movie. A person should feel—if that's the word you must insist on using—about a person." "Bullshit!" she snapped. Eugene laughed out loud. "It wasn't me who said that, Laura, but Godard. Jean-Luc. Your film hero. So now what?"

"Well, what does that make you?"

"You used the word *well.*"

"I didn't. I did not."

As to clubs, there were a number of them in the Boston/Cambridge area. The Middle East. The Paradise. The Lame Duck. The 1369 Coffee House. The Rat. Club Passim. She went to pretty much all of them, except the Lame Duck in Jamaica Plain where, after the fat bald proprietor, a lying, cheating Levantine weasel who stole some books of hers she had left behind in a booth and then to hide his own thieveries accused her of doing so, she never went back again. It was a time-suck, this loitering. Hers was an arrested juvenility, this fixed preoccupation with rock singers, and whenever she went into these clubs, star-roving and animate, a ferocious eroticism ran up her body like lightning. She was everywhere at once. It convinced Eyestones that Martha Graham, mother of modern dance, was correct when she proclaimed that all movement was a product of the genitals! For a while Laura tried, for style, to look cool by buying a lot of bargain jazz records and CDs. There was even a brief spell there of her feigning interest in the ultra-hincty jive mechanisms, soulless and inaccessible, of the off-puttingly overcerebral jazz of John Coltrane. Mostly, she concentrated on clubs and rock music, however. One night Laura heard on stage a singer-guitarist named Ronnie Dawson and his rockabilly group in one of those dives where the bathroom was door-

less and boasted only a curtain, and hearing him, as she explained it to Eugene, became such an epiphany for her that as a kind of cyborgasmistic response she walked around open-mouthed in flux and wonder, her head a stereolab, for about six weeks. "'Rockin in the Cemetery!' Oh man! You gotta hear 'Action Packed'! 'Green-Eyed Cat'! 'Fire Fire Fire'! 'Rumble'! 'Riders in the Sky'—awesome!" "Does he sound like Elvis?" asked Eugene. "Elvis was a moose," said Laura, dismissively. "I don't listen to him. Besides he never wrote any of his own songs." "People always say that," laughed Eugene. "But Elvis Presley did once sing—and *record!*—a song that he in fact actually wrote. It was called 'You'll Be Gone.'" He laughed. "So there. Besides—"

"Besides what?"

She looked palely reproachful.

"Contrary to your understanding, rock 'n' roll wasn't invented last week. What about doo-wop? Ever hear of the Uneeks? The Vibranaires? The Globetrotters? The Presandos? The Chalons? The V-8s? The Infatuators? The Convincers? El Pollos? The Ray-Dots? Henry Strogin and the Crowns?" He leaned over to tap her on the tip of her nose. "You have insider access apparently. What about outsider detachment?"

But as far as she was concerned, he should be selling that snake oil out in Peoria.

No matter where she was, but especially in clubs, she was always pronouncing passionately and loudly, the better to be overheard, about going to see bands in New York, favorites like Sonic Youth, Mercury Rev, Sic Fucks, the Cramps, Rocket from the Crypt, Veruca Salt, White Zombie, and Tappa Zukie. Other groups she went to see and songs that Laura particularly liked were Fat Joe and Diane's "Two Oafs in Maui," Mr. Beam and the Faggot's "I Bite Wires," Scheming Gene and the Baking McKenzies' "Seem Magnanimous, Be Pusillanimous," Mrs. Pynchon and the Black Agents with their big hit, "I Don't Lift a Fucking Finger." Another favorite group of hers, Henchy & the Lawyers—seven short, flaccid-faced zilches who looked exactly the same, each with thick eyeglasses, bad complexions, and fall-away chins—had each done time for stealing money, which in fact had become the source of their many local hits: "Secret Funds," "Cheat, Cheat, Cheat," "Kill the Board of Bar Overseers," and "I've Been Investigated." She also often spoke of Sophie Mentzer and the Touchballs, Johnny Skillsaw, the Nitwitz, Roky Erickson of 13th Floor Elevators, and an entire cac-

archy of other favored demons.

"Roky Erickson—that burnt-out old guy from the Sixties, you mean? Where did you ever hear of him?"

"I have his records. I play his music almost every night. 'Mine Mine Mind,' 'Bermuda,' 'Creature with the Atom,' 'Methcathinone,' 'Bloody Hammer.' Townes Van Zandt played bass with the group for a while, you know," said Laura, folding her arms. "They broke up. Stacy's wife shot him. Then Danny overdosed. Tommy Hall went to California somewhere. And Roky—"

Twaddle, thought Eyestones. And it was obvious she was quoting someone else in her life.

He persisted. He was convinced that she had met someone who was feeding her all this cant. He knew too well the way she worked. It was not a plan; it was an objective. "But *where* did you hear of them?"

She seemed to blush. Embarrassment is one of the emblems of perjury.

"I have my ways."

More than anything, of course, Laura was obsessed with the Craven Slucks, and she walked around in a fog with earphones like cans jammed over her ears, playing their music loudly. "They are totally street!" she would screech. Occasionally she bought Eugene a few of their 45s, which he made jokes about, asking, "Did you happen to see any other fiber discs, grinding wheels, or carbon-tipped cutting blades while you were shopping?" "I dream of the Slucks all the time," she confessed to Eugene one day walking through Cambridge wearing a *Be Naughty, Save Santa the Trip* T-shirt and pausing before the window of a record shop. When she smiled, her gums always took over her face. "I have this one dream. I'm all alone with them in a weird house. Then I'm outside, like in a garden I'm suddenly kissing the lead singer—in the rain! I am biting his biceps! And he goes, so he goes 'This is a fuck-up, mothersticker.'" She burst into high cacchination. "I'm his blow-up doll but he doesn't care and so shares me with the other guys who all do me and like it's Spooge City." She roared with laughter. "Does that gross you out? Am I awful? What, you're disgusted with me. What can I tell ya?" Laura only shrugged. "He gives me groin-pain, I gotta admit." It was almost as if, half-ashamed, she was apologizing to, felt the need to apologize to, her reflection in the window. But she was also half-thrilled. "It's an experience. I don't know, this group is killing me. I'm unstrung! They really turn my head around."

It was around this time that at night Laura began hanging around the record shops on Massachusetts Avenue and Central Square, checking out neo-swing and loungecore clubs like the Green Street Grille and the Lizard Lounge and Johnny D's in Somerville and even going by T into Boston to record shops on Newbury Street, talking to the failed, blown-out, eighth-rate Ted Nugent look-alikes who worked in them, flyaway-haired and moronic and pale, narcissistic session guitarists who used expressions like "chill" and "dude" and "jiggy." When they spoke, they always used swooping circular axe-chops à la Pete Townshend and an entire opera of rock gestures, thrilling Laura with real stories about knowing the late Stiv Bators and Joey Coco Puffs and Jim Filth and Johnny Suede and Steve Ignorant of Crass and Cheetah Chrome and the Dead Boys and of catching acts at CBGBs and of taking crazy mid-riff leaps off stage. It was all of it new and amazing to Laura. She was buying lots of records now and attending more and more concerts, and she even recorded a cut-rate Dutch group called the Outsiders as background for the outgoing message on her answering machine. It was a period for her when her eyelids were usually painted any number of *outré* colors like limesickle or celadon or Araucan teal. She laughingly suggested that she might go out and even get something like an ankle tattoo. She splurged on a pair of "silver bullets": steel eyeglasses with mirrored lenses. Laura said in the grip of a gasconade, "You think I'm a rebel, don't you. A bad girl. I'm too revolutionary for you."

It was mannerism, all of it, theatricality, the elongated and overelaborate gestures—forced, florid, farcical—that film-goers memorized from all those clichéd Hollywood movies: the fellow flatly holding down the pocket of his trousers in order to extract change from it; the detective tossing up, then snatching in mid-air an object, say a key or a coin, that he has just discovered in a drawer visibly, *pictorially*, to underline his satisfaction in finding it; of the improbable thug or corny cowboy in an oversized hat who, having run out of ammunition, desperately stops to throw his gun at the head of his pursuer; the floozy who, to register anger, icily stares into the mouth of the telephone receiver when someone has just rudely hung up on her; the writer at a typewriter who, miming Tinseltown's unintentionally comic idea of the creative process, repeatedly snatches out sheets of paper, crumples them, and throws them behind him. The froth is always the failing, the drama the deceit. People look in the mirror differently than when

they look at you. The plummy voice of the TV broadcaster he always changes when ordering a plate of beans. But it depressed Eyestones to see Laura, to see anybody, in the grip of musical face-measles, throwing herself away on any sewer zombie that walked by.

"I admire rebellion, Laura," said Eugene, "but not regression or wasting your life. I wrote about it in that long essay that Warholic hated. Did you read it? You see it in fairy tales. Boys conjure dragons, ships, sorcerers to defend themselves—they zoom off in planes, run away like Huck, rub bottles to see genies! Little girls rarely rebel. It's sad. There's a revolution in every young person's life that fosters the only kind of growth that ever matters when he or she gets older. Oh no, I encourage the right rebellion, believe me. Mothers in fables and stories are often eclipsed, sent inside, or, when present, become the formalized matronly scolds who routinely prohibit boys from their most wonderful misadventures! I have always considered it pure tragedy that girls are refused a chance to rebel. The question remains, what are you doing with your rebellion?"

"Rebellion?"

"Yes."

"Because I might get a tattoo." She groaned.

"Whatever."

"I've seen skin-and-ink before, so don't get too excited," said Laura who was always making heroes of aggressive little flacks and selling tickets to places she had visited but had actually left in despair. "At the Horseshoe Café in the Lower Haight, OK? Pierced, tattooed, hair-dyed, neo-pagan, radical-chic, dreadlocked, crack-smoking, two-bit ho, butt-banging, fist-fucking, toe-suckin' sex-clubbers drinking Night Train or Zima, OK?" It was comic how Laura was always playing travel agent for San Francisco, shilling the city by way of herself. She told long, tedious Neil Hamburger stories and fondly reminisced how she was able to get fabulous homemade Cappuccino Chip Macaroon ice-cream cones there and would regale anyone around who would listen about how she once got pied in the face by a traveling sexual pieman. "I may be speaking out of turn," said Eugene, "but Mutrux once told Ratnaster and me that in San Francisco you were dedicated to, what?—um, the 'lowers.'" "Why? 'Cause I liked someone like Bettie Page? She's cute. She loved to take it off. I enjoyed what she did. I have no problem with that." She boasted that she and Warholic both used to love going out to clubs to see performance artists—manic ex-

hibitionists in the tradition of lewd, lascivious Lola Montez, a former mistress of the king of Bavaria, doing her dangerous "Spider Dance," slapping at make-believe insects while stripping off her clothes—and had seen people like Hard Cora and Annie Sprinkle who once stage-typed a poem on a typewriter with her ass and Coo-Coo the Bird Girl who flapped around naked singing opera and Danny the Wonder Pony whom women screaming like banshees rode horsey-style with special saddle-reins and a bit in his mouth and Diana Onassis the Stripping Magician who famously pulled twenty scarves out of her "magic box" and gender-bending Shelly Mars who used a beer bottle as a penis at the climax of each show to spray the audience. San Francisco, the Land of Dreams. Eugene almost smiled. It was only more in its comic-book threat of that big bad scare-your-parents posturing of hers, her partying-by-the-gates-of-hell jive. "Hey, you gotta love San Francisco for its color if nothing else," said Laura. "I've seen people on stage dive through buses and explode televisions and masturbate with crucifixes and fuck ducks in public parks and scream like hot whips in orgies of homoerotic paddling!"

Still, unlike a tango dancer, Eyestones had stepped backward, uncharacteristically listening to the kind of twaddle he usually preferred to leave for devotees of lurid science-fiction, stories about people, blaspheming, that behaved like bonobo monkeys.

"How about Mister Whyboy and Whoro, sugarcut, a color-dyke with shaved snatch dyed blue, shaved pits dyed yellow, ladybug tats, both of them bunkering on a stage-sofa, him in a white rubber mask and she wrapped only in number four rope, tight into her bum, eating a Creamsicle while he clubbed her with a jade rod and—"

Again, it was painful to see a person thirty-six years old with crow's-feet and strands of grey in her hair and not a jot or tittle of thought as to where she was heading in life going on at length about knucklehead trash and electro-metal and extra-meta-rock and how she loved hanging around the Epicenter record shop in San Francisco and singing to stippled, old, thumb-printed cassettes that she'd bought at garage sales for a dime and gushing with all seriousness about rock groups. "Listen to the gnarly sounding guitar riffs on this tape, will you? Can you hear the killer Acoustic amp? Static overlays? Strictly heshers, baby! The first time I heard it I was like whoa—I was like *sooooo* into it" or "I'm like wicked into techno-thump" or "Joey Ramone has had his Mosrite guitar for years" or "I want to get laid by the Dream Police" or "I'm,

like, totally sympathetic to riot grrrl" or "Stevie Ray Vaughan used to call his '59 Stratocaster his 'wife'" or "My enemy-friend Gayle, not really my friend, OK, but a close acquaintance, one night slept with the drummer of the Pretenders" or "Do you know Derek Knight and the Blackened Tears? He has his own echo units like dub-pioneer King Tubby" or, as she waggled her Walkman, "Listen! This is Penelope, voice of the Avengers. Have you heard 'Car Crash'? Or 'Beating'? What is so fucking amazing is that she took the very same route that I did, did you know that? Art school background. Rebelled against her parents. Went to San Francisco. Freaked out. Became a groupie." Laura shrugged. "Of course, I don't sing."

No. No, you don't, thought Eyestones, *but you move.* Whereas at one time he understood that her compulsive componentry was common to younger women, he now saw a certain icy guile and guardedness about Laura. Another shape-change. She was no longer incautious but secretive now when he was with her and, wondering who knows what, even developed the collapsed "worried" face of a smallpox victim. The somatotonic person was now a surreptitious one, spookable and skittish in the way that a crow, precariously angled, as it stands, is always snap-ready to dodge quickly away. But secretive about what?

Or about whom?

"She's better than Patti Paladin. Or Siouxsie Sioux. You wouldn't have heard of them, right?" she had asked one night when she seemed particularly crazy. And she was *daily* becoming stranger and stranger. "Or like Judy Nylon? It's funny, really, because when you really stop to think of it, I mean, just like Judy Nylon, I'm, like, well anti-religion and anti-domestic and anti-family myself, which is good because you know, face it, that way is like complete bondage, right?" She unpredictably leapt up, revealing in that awful thinness—almost to the degree of being crotch-sprung—a ravaged and thundering madwoman like one of Shakespeare's Plantagenet queens, and crazily snapped, "Get me a Maya costume! Spread me out like grass seed! Want me to set my hair on fire? Who said, 'When I weep, I want to fuck it away'? Want to talk about death?"

God less America, thought Eyestones, as the broken-bulb sign in front of the Hotel de Dream sadly broadcast, truly a metaphor for the benighted state in which the two of them found themselves. No wonder Laura was unstrung! But then what about the nation? The country itself was becoming a spiritual void, a place of mad materialism and

increasingly bereft of meaning, one of the cities of the plain, a failed experiment, a ruined testament to lost ideals and capable of the most wretched excesses. Ours is a land of civic faith, a country of rich doctors, fat priests, and no shoeshine boys, a nation run by wealthy opportunists and pea-and-thimble men that now flourishes strictly on dollar casuistry and imperialistic misadventures.

Where and how have we lost our way? There are 35 million people in the United States living in poverty. Among 32 major countries examined, we have the worst maternity and leave-time benefits of any other country. More than 80 million people here—8 out of 10 are from working families — fully remain without health care, the cost of which doubles every five years. There are as many as 9 million uninsured children in the United States. It is a nation that leaves its most vulnerable yet deserving citizens unprotected and lost. The homeless are not even allowed to sleep in the streets. Senior citizens are fleeced when buying the same pharmaceuticals that in many other countries are half the price. A good many of unscrupulous American doctors are on the take with pharmaceutical companies who woo them with all kinds of bribes to push the most expensive drugs and medicines on trusting and unsuspecting patients. That is only the beginning of the scandal. This country ranks behind as many as sixteen other nations in life-expectancy and behind twenty-two others in infant mortality. Doctors who have not been making house-calls for more than half-a-century will not operate on you unless you have eaten money. The cost of hospitalization alone in this country has exceeded all imaginable limits. We are turning into a society of decadence, sloth, and reckless indifference. A full 65 percent of Americans are overweight. Obesity, almost at epic proportions, not only leads to poor health and is a severe drain on national health costs but is a sign of the flabby, inflated indulgence and reckless lack of discipline visible everywhere.

Grubby politicians who should be servng for modest pay and with term limits are fleecing the country with both hands, spending funds we do not have and serving in Washington solely to get rich, taking in money as coldly as a mangle pulling shirts. No wonder citizens have to work as long as five months a year merely to pay their taxes. Congressman can still be legally bought off by lobbyists with money and gifts in the very halls of the House and Senate, are demoniacally owned by special interest groups, big business, and favored corporate contributors who are then cozily rewarded in turn with sweetheart deals

and lax liability laws. The prevailing desire for any candidate running for president is to accumulate money, nothing else. There is no bloc in Congress that represents the needs and opinions of people in the vast central band of American life where workers and the middle class overlap. The very politicians sent to Washington to represent them are bilking the people they represent, taxing them to the teeth, depleting their Social Security funds, and indifferently allowing corporations and companies to go scot free for pension default and in one stroke wiping out the entire savings of hardworking Americans. Who would deny the truth of poet e.e.cummings's definition of a legislator? "A politician is an arse upon which everyone has sat, except a man"?

Secret societies and dark, evil, powerful cabals—the Council on Foreign Relations, the Trilateral Commission, the World Bank, the Bilderberg Group—all meet to scheme, to plot, to decide which wars will be fought, who will be elected where, what the prices of oil will be, how costs of living will be determined, where revolutions will begin, why one nation will succeed and another will not, and, taking place in hushed and pre-planned places the meetings are rarely or never covered by the slavish and ineffectual press.

PAC money and covert political contributions effect entire elections. Appropriations bills are frequently passed without inquiries and without hearings. If the average citizen had so much as a hint of how much money is wasted in Washington, completely pissed away on boondoggles and ill-thought-out schemes, there would be a savage revolution. Year in and year out in this country, both national and state politicians and their quangos vote themselves raises, huge pensions, and no end of perquisites, cagily passing their bills at night or on busy weekends so as not to take the heat. A presidential candidate not only has to be rich in order to run today but gauges his or her chances of winning the office solely by the size of his or her wealth. Campaigns rise or fall strictly in relation to "war chests," with checks written to the the pols euphemistically adding "For Senate Committee" and "Republican Solicitation" and "American Foundations" and "Democrats for Justice," which end up in their banks, And yet where *is* the justice? Should it also not be asked why in a country of 300 million people there are still only two flatulent political parties with virtually the same mediocre standard-bearers always showing the same overweening piety for political purposes? What is their job as they see it other than to get reelected? There is no bottom to the political guile, legislative

chicane, and filthy internal corruption in the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives or the thousand devious ways all of it is hidden from public view. Have you heard of the "doctrine of sovereign immunity" in American law? It states that no U.S. government official can be sued for prosecution for acts within the ordinary course and scope of his official duties — the most corrupt law in all of U.S. history. Casuistry prevails. "How can I get more money?" asks the average congressman, snatching bags of cash with both hands like an obese carnival shill skipping out the back of a tent! The Voting Rights Act of 1870 is still disregarded. Cops continue to intimidate black voters, and in the ghetto many millions of their votes go uncounted when they can and do vote, for booth locations for them are repeatedly changed at the last minute prior to voting so that they cannot find them. And why is it that Tuesday—and not Saturday, say, or even Sunday— has for ages been the official voting days, so working people cannot vote?

We are a country, once altruistic and proud, that for the first time in our history now starts wars—Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.—without provocation and without apology. We fight wars by computer, attack countries the size of potholders, and crow and thump our chests after "victory." The U.S. government officially now sanctions torture which the CIA euphemistically refers to as "extraordinary rendition" or EIT, "enhanced interrogation techniques," the kind of crimes we highmindedly punished in the extreme—hanging foreign culprits—when committed by our enemies during World War II. Think of the blasphemy! The abuse of power! Medieval torture inflicted on people by the United States! It has been clearly documented that detainees, without legal representation or even a show-trial have been secretly flown out to certain specified countries—Morocco, Uzbekistan, Jordan, and others—to be tortured for information, shackled, blindfolded, beaten, slapped repeatedly, waterboarded, threatened by dogs, electrocuted, and even raped. We arrest and jail victims and hold them for decades! At present more than a quarter of a million people are rotting in prisons and dungeons unable to see the sun simply and solely because they think differently from their judges on questions of politics or religion, and many of these are American jails where inmates are tortured in medieval fashion. We proceed to defend it all with no end of lies, sophistry, and all sorts of legalistic obfuscation. It is considered unpatriotic by most people to object! We go rolling headlong into small countries with the uncontainable force of ships, tanks, planes,

and rockets in the same barbaric way aboriginal tribes used to rush into battle with the cry of "Meat! Meat!" *The United States of America currently occupies 166 other countries!* A savage and exuberant boomism has replaced patriotism. Evil is defended as necessary. Citizens have transformed into jingo pigs. Reasoned arguments are literally not part of our culture anymore.

There is no logic anywhere. Newspapers are folding, just when we need more and intelligent points of view. There are fewer and fewer family farms, formerly the backbone of America, and, of those, most of them are subsidized. Quality goods are rarely made on these shores anymore. Jobs are breezily outsourced to Mexico, China, Taiwan, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Guatemala, South Korea, and the Philippines. No industry, no incentives. Gossip has replaced news, and the national news networks now nightly report Hollywood film grosses and shill for TV "specials." Forests are being cut down with abandon. More than 2,000 nuclear waste sites are imperiling reservoirs, lakes, and aquifers with disabling and fatal poisons. Water shortages may soon become a global catastrophe. Americans indulgently consume between 95 to 125 gallons of water each day individually, more than any other people on earth. (Most Europeans actually use less than half that.) As a country we are now emitting more carbon dioxide than the rest of the world combined, with China following suit, greenhouses gases steaming with enough poisonous lead, sulfur, and carbon monoxide to alter the life of the planet. We are the last fully meat-eating society on earth, on an insane pilgrimage of consumption without a thought to temperance or limit or sacrifice. There is a monstrous reversal of values among age brackets. Old people nowadays desperately try to look young—lines and wrinkles which are considered vulgar in America are being erased and abraded by creams, hormonal pills, and silicone injections—while children and young people often appear unwholesomely unchildlike, overreaching, and brash. A new world of duncery is aborning!

Churches no longer remain open, except on Sunday morning. Prayers have been banned in schools. TV Evangelists, fake preachers, and faux-apostolic, money-grubbing hucksters have co-opted religion. The Catholic Church has become a haven for pedophiles, many of its priests no longer moral beacons but sex criminals and lusting child-molesters, a private hothouse "club" of depraved monsters. Christmas is no longer a national holiday, with cards now farcically sent saying "Season's Greetings" and "Happy Holidays," nativity scenes are pub-

licly banned, the expression "Merry Christmas" is suppressed, and Christianity as such is being diminished as an entity, all in one generation. T. S. Eliot in his poem "Gerontion" was correct: "Vacant shuttles weave the wind." In the U.S. 50 percent of women have had at least one abortion. (When a woman wants a child, it is a baby, when she does not, it is a fetus.) As of May 17, 2004, by judicial fiat from four unelected judges, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts deems that any and all male homosexuals and lesbians can now officially get married, an option chosen and an act performed often not out of love but as an existence-assertion in an attempt on their part to feel vindicated, as if to say, "I am not a freak!" Spiritual vows are no longer exchanged between man and wife or bride and groom but between "Party A" and "Party B." What was once a holy sacrament between a loving man and woman has been pitifully reduced to neopolitical agitprop. Marriages are already failing. In the United States, two out of three married couples can now be found in divorce courts.

Crime is rampant. Parks are unsafe at night. Half the citizens in Washington, D.C. have witnessed a slashing, more than 20 percent a murder. Neither buses nor taxicabs can carry money to make change, so potentially lawless are the streets. There are four domestic violence homicides a week in this country. We have the highest rape rate of any industrialized nation in the world keeping track of statistics—13 times higher than Great Britain and as much as 20 times higher than Japan. Americans spend $3.5 billion annually on hunting and firearms. Twelve children alone are killed by handguns in a single day. More than half the child executions take place in this country. Three-fourths of all serial killers in the world are American. "Alas, poor country/Almost afraid to know itself . . . / where violent sorrow seems a modern ecstasy," we read in *Macbeth*.

Our drug appetite—hedonistic, corrupt, suicidal—is nothing less than a national epidemic, with every city, county, and state in the grip of severe crisis. The United States comprises 5 percent of the world's population and yet can boast 50 percent of the world's cocaine use. It now costs the average taxpayer more money to send a person to prison than it does to send a student to Princeton.

Teenagers are now using over-the-counter drugs to get high, crushing and snorting Xanax, gulping Ritalin, Valium, Oxycontin, and no end of anti-depressants. Cheating on taxes is at an all-time high in America, with the most glaring examples set by corporations that have

cooked their books for decades to the tune of billions and billions just to avoid taxes. We spend as much as $18 billion in this country on pornography, which is found in abundance in cinemas, on the Internet, and on television. Every night 250,000 Americans call telephone-sex 900 numbers. There are 555,000 first-grade registered sex-offenders in the United States, 60,000 listed in the state of California alone. Where have we gone wrong?

Libraries are closed most of the time, patrons talk out loud in them with impunity, and when they are open most of them resemble day-care centers, with little kids running around the aisles screaming and yelling. Branch libraries of course barely exist anymore, while television flourishes with its deranged incentives for passivity and demeaning appeals to low appetites and no end of credulous and lobotomized minors who are now sinking without a trace into the vast oatmeal of American monoculture. (Run any product on a TV commercial, seduce the viewer with jingles, and people would line up to eat thumbtacks!) A worldwide algebra test recently given showed the United States ranking as low as 14th out of fifteen countries tested. We presently rank at the very bottom of the barrel of all industrialized countries in the world in terms of academic achievement.

College-board scores on average register lower year after year. In a recent poll of students between ages 18 and 24, only 13 percent could locate Iraq on a world map and only 12 percent could identify Afghanistan, never mind pronounce the name of the country— the lowest score of all countries surveyed. (Fever than 20 percent of Americans own a passport, although more than 70 percent have visited Disneyland and/or Disney World!) More than 60 percent of all American households—the majority—do not buy books, although most American families subscribe to cable television. Who is aware that one-quarter of American students do not graduate from high school and who cares? That a full 65 percent of high-school principals are also athletic coaches? That national illiteracy has been pegged as high as 18 percent, which has a direct corollary to this country's production? In 1974 the United States developed 70 percent of the world's advanced technology, by 1984 it was down to 50 percent, and by 2005 it was as low as 3 percent. Where do the best automobiles, the finest watches, TVs, stereos, etc. come from? The answer is simple: not from the United States.

Who is surprised that George Bernard Shaw defined the United

States of America as "The only country that has gone from barbarism to decadence without civilization"?

We are boastful, parochial, jingoistic, infantile, earnest, decadent, poorly read, loud, and self-indulgent beyond measure. Although we still manage with blustering cockiness and bruising disproportionate power to export a caricature of freedom and so-called democracy which, immune to irony, we insist that people all over the world adopt if they know what is good for them, all the while chauvinistically telling ourselves— over and over— we are the best goddamn country on earth!

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, thought Eyestones, *and to the dim subjects for which it stands, on vacation, while we plod, almost risible, with liberty and justice for sale.* And if proof of the rioting irrationality of it all were necessary, there was poor Laura, when he looked up, standing in her big black clumps.

Laura talked and lied, talked and lied. *Stop, shuffle, ball, change,* thought Eugene. And continued to lie. *Step and touch, backside, front, hold. . . .*

Real dunces, he realized, had replaced her awful pencil sketches and becoming her friends or acquaintances had hideously exposed her in the same bald and revealing way that Cubist art nakedly makes manifest every side of an object all at once. Wasn't Laura's failure in life the drawings she could not do? Wasn't his failure also a ferocious caricature of her own? He could taste the heat as he conjured up the blister. The sad unavoidable fact of it all was that she was a challenger, not a fighter, a relentlessly self-sabotaging depressive who, refusing to face truths—men in her life, he suspected, were not impossible to please, but merely did not want to please—created, when not in one of those non-feeling states of polar gloom of hers, an alternate dumbshow of false excitement and auto-arousal that left her equally invisible and unexamined and woefully uncared for. Always acting out roles and assuming disguises that responded to her sense of entrapment and brooding isolation, she did not know what to do simply because she did not know who she was. She was cognitively impaired. With haunting regularity, she actually avoided her thoughts and dodged her emotions by pretending to face them! A sheltered risk is no risk at all. And every self-delusion is ultimately a conspiracy case, one in which he was not only involved but guilty. A dark picture suddenly formed in Eyestones's mind like a self-inflicted superstition in a terrible headache of Laura being suddenly dead. My God, he thought, it was true: *those who cannot*

create can only destroy.

Failure forms a face.

Unfailingly, he had her *image*.

Looking, he saw the studium.

But the punctum is: *She will revenge herself on me. This will be* had its undistorted reflection in *this has been*, he thought, staring upon her face, her image, observing with horror an anterior future in which death was the stake. Every image is this catastrophe.

Laura, folding her arms, said, "I can handle anything and do it on my own."

"Try it then," said Eugene, unconvinced. The break was a barrier, he immediately realized, but the understanding of it would continue as a link.

XXXV
Micepockets

Micepockets was standing hidden behind the door of his apartment on the first floor, cornered, as it were, contorted like an angry ferret, as he heard Laura's voice and that of someone else, a man, talking noisily and barging down the stairs. A jealous muck-sweat measled the ball of his small, heated head as with closed eyes he waited in one spot tightly clutching the doorknob as if squeezing the life out of it. His dyed black hair, combed flat against his head with several stiff strands carefully arranged over his pale forehead, seemed to indicate the effect of melting and began to rise in the hot air. He stamped impatiently and whipped his head back and forth. He felt tight cramps in a stomach that was being eaten up by a terrible consuming anger, one that simultaneously riddled his leg-stump with a merciless and unparalleled ache. He bent over waiting for the cramp to subside and kept wiping back the dingles of hair across his head, which in his anguish always dopily rose like an exclamation point. What were they saying? Was he going deaf? he wondered, twitching. He seemed to catch their movements rather than their sounds in his jaws, like a cobra. " . . . *selfish of you*. . . ." He twitched. At moments, an angry gesture hinted at many more desperately repressed. When he held his breath and strained to hear, he could pick out a few specific words like infections: " . . . *don't call. My wife would try to* . . ." said the man. Laura's voice was clear and complaining. "*And so, what, it's dookie for me, then? Even though she's in New*

York City? Can't you tell her. . . ." As they slammed the door, the cripple angrily scuttled to the window, darting like a marlin, jumping ugly to try to get a glimpse of the man, but just as he got there they were soon out of view. Little Ella and Nella, two of his kids noisily underfoot, were twirling the broken knob that had once been the newel-post of the staircase when he slapped them.

He ran out and jerked hobblingly after the two figures up River Street, frozen-faced as if at a state funeral and stumping along in ugly iambs of hot wrath, the flex and unflexing of his body working somewhat like a mad nutcracker slipping and always missing the nut. Central Square, not quite a slum, is a tired, run-down neighborhood composed of hamburger joints, old Army-Navy stores, shabby Indian restaurants, small Vietnamese restaurants, loan shops, pizza parlors, several record shops, hardware stores, various cut-rate furniture stores, McDonalds, drugstores, and various small businesses along the upper stories of long buildings like finance companies and law offices. In the morning Laura always parked her bicycle in one of the bike racks on the sidewalk there whenever she took the T into Boston, and when she returned at night often found it vandalized. The Needles & Tracks record shop was located over by the T side of the square over by the Slightly Red Bookshop with its window displaying Mao-red books, literature from the People's Republic of China, and pamphlets on North Korea and Albania. There were some cheap eateries there, where Eugene and Laura often ate, Mrs. Buloni's Soups, Chidorigafuchi's—the Japanese walk-in/walk-out food spot—and, occasionally when they were insolvent, they went to Lung's, the chancy but cheap restaurant (no place mats, filthy sugar bullet, tile floor, etc.) in the neighborhood with its misspelled *Busses Welcome* sign. Tom Flurkey's Turkey Pavilion served fistwiches for 99 cents each after the car dealership closed down. There was the Stone & Cone, a tiny ice-cream shop that also sold gravestones in the back lot. They shopped both at the Food Crypt—they also used nicknames for every shop and store—and Kliptown, a cheap department store, and occasionally even bought small eatables at a natural food store that they referred to as Bunnyfood's and sometimes as Twig City. A Target store on the corner they always sardonically referred to as "Targêt," to rhyme with Fabergé. A tall, filthy-white, narrow building on one corner that housed the Elysée Hotel, known affectionately as "The Easy Lay," stood on the Harvard side of Central Square, just down the street from the just-as-seedy Hotel Mas-

sachusetts behind City Hall with its pile of old Victorian brownstone.

The Hotel de Dream with its flaking paint and sign out front with the perpetually missing bulbs reading *God less America* stood shabbily in back of the square like an old warehouse and remained in perpetual shade. River Street ran down to the river from Central Square in one long straightaway with three-decker walk-ups on both sides.

Traffic was hell there in that neighborhood, a perpetual gridlock of parked and moving cars reeking of octane and hot sun, with every single street meeting at one spot incoherent with buses and vehicles going everywhichway. Eyestones called it "Malfunction Junction." Laura once put her mother up on a visit over a Labor Day weekend at the Velour Motel, a dive where Laura later got in a spitting argument with a jug-headed manager in a fruit Western shirt who, having once seen her there with a black guy, propositioned her. ("She has such a vulgar back," said Chasuble later of Laura's mother when he happened to see her once getting out of Eyestones's car on Western Avenue—he had taken Laura as a favor to pick her up at North Station as she didn't know the T.) It was an area Eyestones usually avoided. At T stops on both sides of Massachusetts Avenue hip black dudes with a go-to-hell air were always standing around checking out the scene, campy updates of Seventies pimp-chic with names like Funkmaster Flex and Dopema and Señor U-Got-It and Mr. Transistor. They were "doorway guys," jiggling change in their pockets and jiving. "Sup, baby?" "Yo, baby, I want to talk to you. I fiend for that shit!" "Jibba job yo' bad self down to my shack, momma! I makin' a booty call! You fly! You *flah*!" "That runnin, baby momma!" "Hey, where yo' trippin'? Why you buggin'?" "I gone give you some diddy wah diddy, known'm sayin'?" "Girl, why you gotsta diss my ass like dat? I own fuck you up. Know'm sayin'?" "Hey ho, gettin' jiggy wid' it? I wan me a piece of that jellyroll!" "Gotsta get my swerve on, gotsta get my *swerve* on, bitch!" "Hey, Chicken Legs, come up for a li'l flossin, a li'l talk, Chicken Legs, 'cause I gots, I gots, I *gots* what you need, baby, see what I'm saying, the goooods!" "Someone call heaven, hey. They a angel missin' up there! I want them wangs!"

The two figures were just disappearing into the dark well of the T stop, heading in-town, when Micepockets in the grip of blue menace saw the man. Wasn't that frizzy hair on the whoremaster? And a black leather jacket with a patch of an Indian chief's war bonnet on the left arm?

Biting his nails in vexation, angry with jealousy, Micepockets cripple-bounced down several stairs and screeched, "*I'm the wlast man you'll ever wlove!*" After Laura and the man she was pawing were fully out of sight, Micepockets, infuriated, stumped down River Street and back to his house, which he entered from the back cellar door. He moved noiselessly as a phantom through the laundry room to avoid his wife's attention and, after stopping to take off his built-up shoes and putting on his list slippers, threaded through the musty darkness up the back stairs to the flat of Laura Warholic. He peered, blinking back like a hamster through the vacant half-light. He selected a key on a ring of them and quietly let himself in. Two minutes sufficed for him to pick his way through the dim room, a dark-haired twisted *nachgedunkelter* crouching forward in quick hopping jerks, looking for some man's photo, any man's photo, going from object to object with his filthy nail-bitten fingers. Stacks of cassettes. Boxes of books. Fliers of guys with guitars. Communist posters. He went cat-sniffing through her doomed clothes, slowly fingering the nap of several pairs of panties and smelling them. He riffled the pockets of her soiled jackets. He threw sweaters about. He read a stupid postcard from Mexico on the dresser and wondered why she had put it there. He picked up to examine a small grey tin toy elephant, balancing a ball. He paused, he thought he heard a noise from somewhere, he closed his eyes to listen. He crouched and held his breath. It was nothing. He stood up and began to sort through the drawers in her dresser to see what he could find. He opened various bottles of pills and nosed them. He lifted each dusty sofa-cushion and then checked under the bed, sweeping his small hand in an arc under the bedsheets, feeling for used condoms, the stale biscuity odor of the ghost of Laura's dead and meager thinness rising to his nostrils from the rumpled mattress. If she had been present, lying asleep but suddenly opening her eyes, she would have unbelievably stared upon with no small shock a crippled, semi-lycanthropic desperado with a crêpe face hovering menacingly over her like some kind of evil grey duppy, snorting with lust.

Micepockets quickly stripped naked, pulling off even his skull-ring, and grunting like a forest pig crawled into her bed. A persimmony-looking empty sleeve, he lay there momentarily staring up at the ceiling. He bounced in the bed and kept bouncing. He licked her pillows. He picked up one of her large size-10 sneakers and, moaning from horniness, uncontrolled, there in the Stygian dark, intermittently be-

gan badly rubber-beating himself red with it for almost a half-hour. He languished on his back there for a while and then got up. And moving with speed. And creeping down the back stairs. And stumping once more through the cellar to his hiding-place to fumble through some drawers. And now he was holding a gun.

The destructive image would not leave him, for that was frizzy hair on the whoremaster, wasn't it? It was. And a black leather jacket with an Indian chief's war bonnet on the left arm? It was. It was. It was. It was. It *was*!

XXXVI
River Street Flat

Every apartment is an autobiography. Laura's old flat on River Street was an ill-lit reptillary of soiled clothes, strewn papers, and broken shades. It was situated on the top floor of a grey three-decker in the narrow warren of drab backlots and the maze of ugly one-way streets between the slow Charles River and Central Square with its pointless traffic islands. Trucks juddered by, cars sped past. From a niche Eyestones picked up a small ivory elephant that he had bought Laura in Chinatown at the August Moon Festival the previous August.

"Don't be so *very* about all that, will you?"

He looked up. "About?"

"Straightening stuff. I mean, everything in this place bites, but it's like I look up and you have this kind of assessing thing going on."

A moist east wind was always depressingly blowing down the street. There were always several snotty-nosed kids on the high cement front stoop, small girls with fallen ankle-socks and torn frocks, clipped desperate hair, and empty eyes. Elda, the oldest, hugely disliked Laura and often called her names. A rickety stairway led up through the darkness. It was always unnaturally dark inside. In her small room, some of her drawings—contorted bodies, legs like arms, heads like buttocks—hung on the walls and on the back of the door. She had attended art school in New York but had wasted her parents' money on a degree she had never put to use, simply because she not only could not

draw but even on a merely conceptual level had not the slightest gift for (a word she loved to use) "rendering." The decor was terse. There was the Iggy Pop poster on the wall. The Joel Peter Witkin reproduction of the dead fat man sitting in a chair, headless, wearing only a pair of socks, as if her very picture partner, a grotesque double in madness, hung askew and sorely saddened Eyestones who, after straightening it, turned away. There were two other rooms on that floor, those of her two mostly absent roommates, the only rooms that showed even a semblance of neatness.

"What's that?" She was pointing.

"A typewriter."

Laura made a face and began quickly trying to make the apartment shipshape. A bare bulb hung from the ceiling on a wire in Laura's room, the kind that sparked and smoked. The *bombilla*, thought Eyestones, fuse of *Guernica*. The cord was frayed. Desolation. The room had the hempy, not-quite-dead smell of old government housing with beaverboard walls and a wooden floor that seemed to go uphill. There was—from pipes?—an underodor of Lysol or Dettol or some harsh kind of industrial cleaner. A brownish water came from the faucets of the sink, rusted with orange scour. A ragged blind turned slantways in the one cracked window, letting in the pale sun, as well as the plastic curtain stained by years of hard water that hung celluloid-stiff in the shower stall reminded Eugene Eyestones of hot-sheet joints rented by the half-hour in Saigon. A hard chair lined the wall with no one asking it to dance. Another ladder-back chair missing most of its slats served as a shelf for a two-foot stack of vinyl LPs. The bedcover, with its rumpled blankets, was a trash heap of cracker boxes, empty coffee cups, candy wrappers, half-eaten tins of tuna fish, spilled milk, assorted other droppings and piles of yellowing out-of-date tabloids, *National Enquirer*s and *Star*s and *Globe*s, which her grandmother sent her from Syracuse on a weekly basis. Discarded socks of hers lay everywhere like route indications to some jumble sale. It was a catbox. "How can you sleep with the sound of traffic outside?" asked Eugene, peering out of the window to the noises of children's shouts. Laura was still making half-hearted but abrupt, squirrel-like movements to try to straighten the place out. Her lavender hair, surrounding that small weak face of hers, looked draggled and loafy like a mophead hydrangea. She was wearing an aura bracelet on one arm and a punk wristlet with studs on her right wrist and a black crewneck sleeveless blouse. "I masturbate,"

she said, shrugging. It was in a way uncharacteristic of her: she who was so dependent seemed almost indifferent to him now. She had an edgy smile as she looked at him and said sarcastically, "Slick mittens, you know? Petting Snoopy. Rolling the mink. Buttering the bead." She kick-slid a box sideways. "I have a Prelude 3 Vibrator, my 'pink pearl,'" she said. "You think I'm a bad girl, don't you? I can tell. Shallow. Vulgar. Fill in the blank."

Her room smelt of applesnails. The potato-colored wallpaper, mottled with stains and unpeeling in flaps all around the room, was particularly hideous, and in places where the wallpaper had flaked off the walls were wumpsed with rough plaster. There was an empty dampness to the place. The kitchen was a cubbyhole, the floor uncarpeted, the chairs worn, and over a lazy-top Formica table in one main room a coarse sheet of oilcloth was thrown on which cold glasses had left a phalanx of circles. The electric wall-sockets were all tilted twenty or so degrees off vertical. A plain bookcase in the room was filled with paperbacks on punk music, a few psychology and self-help books, lots of home pharmacopia books and pamphlets, books by Ayn Rand, and whole piles of crapulous 'zines, Laura's primary reading. There was a small stack of *Quink* magazines. A few ring notebooks on conflict-management skills from some office job she had. Some of her own journals, scribbled notes recorded in red- and black-shell cash ledgers. "Dan, a friend of mine in San Francisco, has most of my books, the bastard, and better return them. Boxes of them." All the contents of the room, crowded with boxes and trash, seemed to push the air out of the room. There was a sense of brownness, a coalescent odor of damp books and unwashed blankets, of cats and illness, of must and sadness and the sebum of her body.

An open closet revealed a few leatherette jackets, nylon windbreakers, and cheap scarves, with three or four old, stolen Jordan Marsh hangers. A broken toaster and hot plate, along with some round boxes, sat on an upper shelf, while several boxes of shoes sat on the closet floor. Her earmarked paperback of *The Soap Opera Syndrome* from the previous summer had been poked into a thin net catchall hanging on a nail.

It was Upsidedownland! The Wherehouse! Eyestones referred to the place as Bluegate Fields, from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. A batch of snapshots Laura had taken of herself with a self-timer in her San Francisco digs, some close-ups, several showing her fully naked, wear-

ing neck scarves, smeared with lipstick, were stuck in a mirror, spotty and losing its silver, along with several snipped-out pictures from various magazines of actresses and singers like Sandra Bernhard, Juliette Lewis, Laura Dern, and the cadaverous singer Patti Smith, the kind of rude, in your-face, squandered women with whom, always in a ghostly validation of herself and with enough disillusioned wittiness to maintain irony, Laura insistently identified and madly sought to defend and at times even promote. Another wrinkled snapshot with a dog-eared corner, once ripped in two, now cellophaned, of a weak, flaccid-faced man slipped out. Eugene held it up to look at it. It was a silly-looking person without knack. Laura snatched it out of his hand and slapped it on the table, face down. She exclaimed, "*That* . . . is not necessary."

Her roommates—Maudie, a big blonde, and Wing, the Chinese woman—were at home in their rooms. They were rarely there the few times he had visited in the past. They disliked Laura for her stand-offishness and indifference to them and so avoided her themselves. Maudie was a great inky cone of drapery, conspiratorial, secret, aloof, whose sobs from her desolate adulterous affair with a married man Laura heard almost every night. Wing, however, was softly graceful and darkly pretty, and from the first moment he was introduced Eyestones badly wanted to know her. Noises from the street only added to the confusion there.

There was on a mantle an athletic cup that Laura held up. "It's Robin Zander's, with three dimes and four pennies in it. You like that, huh? And, hey, look at this, Puppy Knees," she said, holding up some pieces of limp leather, demonstrating proudly that she was, wishing badly that she seemed, a complete hedonist. "A pair of drum-gloves of Cheap Trick's." It was the classic *repêchage* of the small, defiant profile she once had and sadly sought to hold. She paused as if hearing in the silence a vibration of criticism. "*What?*" she loudly inquired to preclude any possible criticism. "I can't live without love—and I don't mean like your parents' love, OK? That *so* does not count." She flinched. "My parents never loved me anyway." Laura interrupted herself and angrily ran to slam the one open window in order to stifle the shouts of the bleating children outside. "Did you hear me? Do you listen? I said they never loved me anyway." It was characteristic of Laura in shifting moods to go from delight to despair. She always disliked what she did not like more than she liked what she liked.

"Who's the older man in the photo?" he asked.

"My father."

He was paper-pale and looked as though he had been processed in cold water like an ugly kosher chicken with all of his blood removed by way of being salted. Selfish-looking and pinched, he worriedly held up a hand to ward off the photographer from any further invasion.

Everywhere in the room were stacked piles of CDs, cassettes, and LPs. An empty, glowering Mrs. Butterworth syrup bottle held the long stems of three or four distinctly dead strawflowers. A wind-up tin toy that Eyestones had once given Laura, a circus elephant riding a tricycle and balancing a blue ball with tassels, sat in a makeshift orange-crate bookcase, along with two brown ceramic tiki glasses with Aku-Aku faces on them. He went in to use the bathroom, briefly stepping out to ask, "Crest?" He was disapprovingly holding up the Proctor and Gamble product in a tube. Laura coldly flicked a finger at him and said, "Whatever." A broken box of sanitary napkins had been left open. Jars of Vaseline. Monoxidil II. Boxes of Kim-Wipes. He tried to avoid taking note on a pile of mélange-colored towels on a straw hamper a man's wristwatch, which he was certain belonged to Discknickers whom he recalled having claimed that she had taken it. A yellowing wardrobe, next to a heap of laundry, overflowed with cheap clothes of the thrift-shop and jumble-sale variety, owned by the sort of person who never got the "pretty girl" discount.

"What are you doing?" asked Laura after Eugene returned, having gone into the bathroom to use it herself.

Eyestones was standing on a box to reach the lightbulb. He had found an old bottle of Baker's Vanilla Extract, twisted open, not easily, its rusted tiny red metal top, and tipping it for a drop on his index finger, said, "A drop of vanilla on a lightbulb smells like baking bread." He shrugged. "It has a nice scent."

"Why, is it musty in here?" she indifferently called out.

"Not . . . musty."

"There's a can of instant coffee in the pantry," shouted Laura through the open door of the bathroom, where she uninhibitedly squatted, peeing. "At least there was. I've got nothing else to offer you. I haven't had time to get to Targêt-as-in-no-pay, get it?" "I thought you drank only Starbucks," he said. She piped up, shiny as chrome, "Only when you're buying." Her habits bore the random anti-etiquette of Generation Xers, sluggos with their heads shaved, ruleless, indifferent, and slack. Flooding in on him as he stood there, in a place he

had avoided so long, was the recollection, as if united, of all her lax behavior, a regime she always defended whenever he tried to discuss it with her, not with words but with an attitude of wooden-faced stupidity, looking sideways and self-absorbed, of the sort that one notices in the squint of golfers following a shot or on the face of a cheesy drummer sitting bored above his traps and smugly working his brushes. She never thanked anybody for favors. She never finished reading a book. She lost or misplaced any gifts you gave her, bracelets, rings, books. She thought nothing of reading other people's mail, was always late and rarely kept appointments, and was sloth-slow getting out of a car, answering a question, and forming a thought. It was close to unbearable. She had accumulated huge library fines. She never ate all the food on her plate. She did not know how to cook a meal, set a table, use a napkin, or serve a plate. Was it a Polish trait to *sweep* rugs to clean them? If order were a test of sanity in a room, this room, this dark place—this woman—was bedlam itself.

It was dungeon-dark. The piercing playground-screeches of Micepockets's little girls still maddeningly rose from out front where they ran around playing hide and seek on the grill-railing. "One of those kids took my hand the other day and a sticky substance in her warm palm almost glued us perpetually together," grizzled Laura. "I hate them. Hate the little pains-in-the-ass. I deal with them the way I would deal with little evil elves. I hate this *place*." Laura's only real loyalty seemed to be essentially to confidences she committed in her witchy journal, that companionate daybook of hers pedantically listing her grievances and the crimes of others against her, while conveniently omitting her own grievous faults and offenses and the kind of poisonous gossip that she always gave to the new man in her life of all the previous ones. Discknickers, with whom Laura, Eugene had only lately learned, had a brief and apparently hateful affair during one of the months when he had gone to San Diego, once told him in a moment of confidence, "You'd be humiliated if you knew what she said about you."

When at the time Eyestones confronted Laura about it, she could no longer dissemble by the incontrovertible evidence of Discknickers having been to her flat.

"I was lonely," she said with foolish glabrification. "I admit it. I telephoned him, figuring you were betraying me in Cuernavaca. I was lonely, lonely and depressed. But he's a cold bastard. He didn't make love to me. He said he wasn't attracted to me." Her mouth was set in

a firm, bitter line. "He claimed I had a flat ass, which turned him off. He said he considered me to be a paralytic." Of course because she would lie about anything, he never knew whether to believe her or not, under any conditions. "What Discknickers most likes to do is to insult people." "I have told you that many times," said Eugene. "The racism, the grumbling intolerance, the left-behind's panicky refuge against a dizzily changing modern world." Laura bitched, "He called me a Gypsy, living out of sleeping bags, said I lived like an outlaw, claimed I had no what the government calls 'address hygiene'"—she snorted angrily—"what, a history of lost mail? You know, like I was crazy, unstable, and unable to reach."

"Lost letters?"

"Or untraceable."

"Untraceable?"

"I don't know. He said I lived like a servant."

Eyestones sadly looked at her fucoidal hair.

"To whom?"

"I don't know. He used to come over on Thursday nights and sarcastically say it was the traditional night off for domestics." As happened so often when her mouth smiled, her eyes never did. "'My night or yours?' I'd ask. He'd get furious." She shrugged. "Once he shoved me; that's assault."

"That's battery. Shaking a fist, giving someone the finger—that's assault." Laura saw his stare and exasperatedly put her hair up in a prussic knot. "Why would you let someone in who behaved like that?"

"I didn't care."

"For him or for yourself?"

She stomped on an earwig.

"No reply?"

"What does it matter now? He watched television all the time anyway. What a sick fuck. He called it 'The Electronic Jew.'" Laura shook her head and crossed the room where she fell onto the gutted sofa as a spray of dust rose out of a hole where she sat slumped like a mummy. "Claimed every show on television is produced, directed, and run by Jews. With Jew actors. That all the networks are owned by Jews. Radio included. Public radio was Zionist twaddle, he used to say. PBS, stringers, interviewers, all of it. 'The Electronic Jew.'"

"What did you do?"

"Drank. Got toasted." She folded her arms. "Wrote."

"Wrote?" he asked.
"Right."
"What?"
"Letters to you. And—"
"To *me*?"
"That's what I said. And made—"
"I received exactly *one* letter from you while I was away."
"—and made additions, if you'd let me finish."
"Additions?"
"To my notebook."

Eyestones again recalled her letters to him. She wrote—*penned*, actually—with difficulty, letters that showed a handwriting so spidery—loops and upside marginalia and erasures and big superadded balloons and scratchings out—that reading any page became a truly cognitive task, particularly since the paper she always employed and sent, fraying down one side, came always in bunches of disparate pages indifferently ripped out of various spiral notebooks and added to sheets of other shapes and sizes from other sources. What were the differences in writing between men and women, Eyestones wondered? Whatever. It seemed to him a perfect if oblique idea for one of his columns. Were the sexes revealed in their syntax? Did the plush adjective, the reticent question mark, the soft reliance on the weak comma, undermining solid vehemence, reveal in the composing mind girlish diffidence? Was a terse, laconic style a man's? Caesurae proof women weakly had to tell us when to take a breath? He had previously addressed related matters: female broadcasters and reporters on television in their delivery almost always tried to sound like men, giving to stressed words an ersatz gruffiness and chin-firm stridency not naturally theirs. Laura, who always held a pen awkwardly and wrote with her right thumb literally wrapped around it topped by an index finger—it was not so much held as gripped—habitually and hysterically penned over words and letters, almost perversely, making weird double lines with each and every stroke, multiple exposure lines, almost as if she intentionally used a double-nib to give a drunken or ringing look to whatever she wrote or re-did or traced over, all of it causing in Eyestones, whenever he tried to read one of her letters, a kind of retinal headache. It was only another way of reading her. In any case, this became the formal cause of his having set out one day with resolve to buy her this particular present and why, after work, he had come by this night.

Eyestones lifted onto the table the typewriter he had bought for her. It was a lovely leaf-green Hermes 9, Swiss-made and solid as a rock. He carried it to the table and carefully lifted off the shell cover. Frowning with a slight disgust, Laura got up, walked over, and looked down on the machine as if it were some antediluvian object. "No one fucking even knows how these goddamn things work anymore," she squawked, laughing, typically negative, tapping the platen to see if it was made of rubber and lethargically and disconsolately slapping the carriage side to side. She folded her arms and, stepping back, looking at him, smiled angrily as if she wanted it understood that something was being fobbed off on her, and when she smiled, her long nose reached her mouth so wide that it seemed she was swallowing her nose.

"It's an *historic* typewriter, a Hermes. During World War II, Ernie Pyle faithfully lugged one around Europe in a musette bag and did all his best work on it." He tapped it. "So did Walter Cronkite. Of CBS News?"

She dryly remarked, "It's . . . interesting."

The factotum adjective, he thought. Her favorite word.

"It is so last-millennium," she added.

"Please."

"Out of date."

"Not," he said. "It's an appliance of science."

"For fuddy-duddies."

"I've used one all my life."

"That long?" She looked at him. "Wasn't that way back when electric lightbulbs came to a point, *hon*?" she asked, dotting the sarcasm with a bit of savoring delight.

The Man with the Faraway Eyes regarded the ghost of folly and felt as he usually did after giving her something, anything: that it was pointless.

"Try?" he pleaded. He tossed onto the bed several boxes of typewriter ribbons and, opening another, slitting the cellophane, handed her the two small interlocking wheels. "Look closely. Typewriter ribbons are amazing. I got a few boxes for you at Huau's cigar store. Three hundred and twenty thread-counts per square inch. Only Egyptian Pima, or Sea Island cotton, goes higher," he said, unslipping a spool from one of the boxes. "It's the tightest fabric on earth. Look. Try pulling it. If you wanted, you could hang Virginia hams from it."

Half-listening and yawning Laura stooped over to pick up a dis-

carded skirt, shaking it free in order to identify it.

Pretty Wing from nowhere suddenly emerged from her room. She was dressed in a robe of orchid satin, like shot silk, glancing with many colors, wore no makeup, and her short hair was brushed behind her ears. Although she said not a word, Laura, stiffening, went suddenly cold and disturbed, like a fisherman uneasily feeling the rise of an east wind. It was not the first time Eugene had noticed Wing. He had seen her coming down the front stairs leaving for work the day Laura had moved in to River Street. She smelled clean and pure as she passed by, refreshing, a cross between fabric-softened sheets and peppermint. Curiously, Laura would never answer a single question about her. Sorry, not someone that pretty. Maintaining custody of the eyes, Wing set down a mug in the pantry and simply passed through on a glide to the other room. She had long scythe-legs, and the uncomplicated, photogenic features of her gamboge-white skin, gracefully pretty, appeared to be a sort of alabaster lamp giving off light. Laura's assessing blue-steel gaze at her, aside from the fact of her deliquescent beauty, he felt could be traced to the ongoing dislike she harbored for the young Vietnamese woman from Eugene's past whom she openly despised whenever she was mentioned and who was a topic he always tried to avoid.

No one was harsher on her own sex. Eugene could never follow the roommate situation. Women came and went. The place seemed at odd times to be an entrepôt between a YWCA and a cathouse. But whenever he inquired who was whom, Laura either ignored him or dismissed them as losers. "Losers," she would repeat like the univerbal raven of Poe. He was surprised that she even tolerated a roommate. One young woman, a Catholic from center to circumference, offended Laura by spookily having dared to enter the premises with a black Ash Wednesday smudge in the middle of her forehead and, pushed to it, left the same day. Another candidate of abstractly brief tenure Laura offhandedly claimed "chewed funny." Still another, a Radcliffe student (in music) there on trial, had the effrontery to criticize Laura's favorite rock group and departed that morning after finding on her bed a cold letter express delivery—*cursus velox*—stating that she had found someone else.

"Don't hold it against me that this place is such a lame-ass mess," Laura complained, suddenly growing meaner, having witnessed Wing walk by. Lame-ass mess? The Valley of Ichor, he thought. Misery. Iso-

lation. Loneliness. And so characteristic of her. He heard Galatians 5:9: "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough"—which bothered him, for he knew when the word *yeast* in the Bible is used as a symbol, it indicates evil of false teaching. She pulled open the wardrobe to hang the skirt. There was rattling of coat hangers against the door. "Want some milk?" she asked, taking a carton out of the refrigerator and, upon opening it, smelling the contents. She sat down. She got up, punted aside a few discarded rolls of shelf-paper as well as a dusty box under the bed and hurled a blanket over a pile of trash. "You do, you know. Hold things against me. You're critical. You don't accept me for what or who I am." He said nothing but thought: *Don't you see that if one were not critical, by accepting your slovenliness, I could end up that way myself?* Still, he pitied her in that room. There was no warmth, nothing to come home to. He always dreaded going there. She was caverned off from everything, and whereas at one time she never came out of the place, now that once she did, she rarely went back. From outside came the persistent cries in unison from the small girls jump-rope style, "*Scarecrow! Scarecrow! Scarecrow*!" Eugene went to look down, hefting up the sill, but, suddenly appearing behind him, Laura reached over and slammed down the window. "Cunts," she muttered.

She gave him a face.

"Don't say anything. I'm not in the mood for it."

On the wall, along with a recently added yellow flier apparently taken in the Quincy Market of a rock group she had been mentioning called the Craven Slucks—four pie-faced dunces in aviator sunglasses and black leather jackets—were taped a few of those bad drawings of hers, crutched anatomies and softball heads and thick clubs standing for human arms and legs in a series of sketches done in a weekly "Figure Composition" class she had begun attending, deformed, slanting females, for the most part, differentiated from the other sex only by the usual display of vulvas that every last cranky feminist with a charcoal always unapologetically insists we see in detail. They were figures, with their ungainly prominence of buttocks the size of beach umbrellas—sort of academic space-filler—she seemed to have done out of wish fulfillment or simply plain out ridicule to compensate for her own shortcomings. "I hate living in this fucking place. Wing with all her lists and *thingies!* Always wanting to have meetings so we can organize a *chore-wheel?* Cut the shit. And then Maudie who broke up with that married man-slash-boyfriend of hers and who at times can be a high-

postage bitch, I assure you, let a friend of hers sleep in my own bed a few weekends ago! Can you believe it?" Eyestones only wondered where Laura had spent that very same weekend, but he never asked anymore the kind of questions that once he would have, not anymore. "So what happens? I have to dish out money I don't have to buy a lock for the door here. And you would not be wicked fucking bummed?" She gestured. "Hey watch out! Sit over there! That chair is dodgy! I was looking for one over at Kliptown, where everything even there is pricey, so I got it thrifting at Morgan Memorial." She flung a broken cup into a trash box. "But remember when I asked if I could move in with you? You didn't want me."

"It's not that I didn't want you."

"You didn't!" she cried. "Don't deny it. I offered to clean your bathroom, to clean house, to do washing. I care for you. I'm faithful to you. I don't look at anyone else. I'm interested only in you."

Sleep in my own bed? Eyestones saw only a flat mattress spread on the floor. How could one make love—intimacy without commitment—with someone with no body, who loathed children, did not read, could not cook, acted surly, avoided work, was going nowhere, may have AIDS, had no talent, smelled bad, and railed at God?

Memories create expectations, and he knew she came to him with a vision of defiance that sought compensation, for everything prevented her in life. It was the nature of her "enthusiasm." She had no faith, as such, did not believe in God or in anything, for that matter, but oddly, perhaps because of that, with an almost icy glare into the improvident and unobliging universe maintained the secular hope that *because* of that lack of faith, a total indifference to the supernatural, people like her, above all, deserved the help that believers—she inevitably saw such people as wealthy because they were wealthier than she—could provide. Nothing less would suffice for her. It was a mess. A big C.F., thought Eugene. A Charlie Foxtrot. A cluster fuck. An operation ending up in confusion.

"You're interested only in me, you say, Constance Quisnet?"

"I care for you," she said.

"Did you say faithful?" asked Eyestones.

She squinched up her face. "What?"

"Faithful, Quonstance Cisnet, is that what you said?"

She heard a noise in the other room and lowing her voice said, "I don't know what you're getting at."

"I simply like to know the truth."

"I don't lie," she lied, and as a displacement activity space-cadeted out into the hallway. She seemed to have learned the celebrity trick—or was it the politician's?—of making all questions the same question, all answers the same answer, and handing them back like an unopened package that she herself, as if having surmised the contents, out of guile flatly refused to open. Laura Malarkey! "I'll be right back. I have to, erm, make a call. Wait here? I have to . . . call my grandmother in Syracuse," she called over her shoulder. She temporized a moment then ducked her head into Maudie's room and whispered, "Are you leaving now? Before you go, will you let me borrow a sexy dress for a special occasion?" "Which dress?" "Shshshsh, not so loud," hissed Laura. Checking behind her carefully to be certain that no one heard, she smiled her big red smile and whispered, "That plum 'barbed wire' dress you have? Purplish. For godsakes, Maudie, you know. The sort of see-through job? It protects the property but doesn't hide the view."

Eugene adjusted the ribbon in the typewriter. He thought of that word: *faithful*—to what? He knew she was lying, of course. She had always had an intimacy issue, to start with, and her low, fishy, underhanded imitations of caring were too obvious to hide. She never gave all the heart. For all her jealous harangues over nothing—a pizza waitress, some girl on a bus, a brassiere ad in a magazine showing a beautiful woman, a female's sexy radio voice, a semi-talented woman's drawing of a jackal he once bought—she grew dug in and flatly refused to be blamed for any of her conniptions or spats. Overheatedness, anger, was her logic, the phony defense of the revisionist. With whatever new vulgarity she demonstrated in one of her bouts of low suspicion, throwing a shoe, hurling an insult, barging about like a cartoon charwoman, she would later defend as the act of a victim. A real man would not be bothered by it. All women were like that. And if he had nothing to hide it wouldn't have bothered him. She was the Queen of Excuse Aerobics: she was having her period, it was an onset of A.D.D., she was tired, it was early in the morning, there were things on her mind, it was coffee-nerves, etc. Being nosy was one of her vices. Overhearing was another, like Barbara Stanwyck in *Sorry, Wrong Number.* Eugene, who had for so long tried to care, knew that it led nowhere. Her moods were impossible to combat. Whatever she promised, she never delivered, and when she looked to him for a response, his mind was like a dead car battery that would not turn over.

What she had failed to see about herself was her eternal but unabated desperation with its self-deceit and low intrusive revisionism that, almost as an aspect of being asleep or unconscious or ill, undermined the simple comfort found in telling the truth and feeling free. "Reflection is not the goal of Western or Eastern faith, but consciousness," he told her one spring afternoon the previous year when, visiting Saint Joseph's Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts, they sat together overlooking green fields of clover and she had commented on how in her opinion the monks in their confinement were fleeing responsibility. "'Who are you?' they asked Buddha," said Eugene. "His answer was, 'I am awake.'" *I am awake.* Why did Laura always come in on a slant and always force people to bring a seriousness to life? She was her mother again: merely the thin concave of the fat convex. She was also one of those driven, demented, Dionysian obsessives and ultra-energetic sex-hysterics who, for all her protests of love for you, was the kind of person who as soon as you turned your back could fall in love with a UPS deliveryman or a slim waiter serving a cutlet or any garage mechanic doing a lube who sailed at her, defending such a thing with almost astrocartographical surety, and then disappear with the guy without one look back or a single regret. It happened with people all the time. It had been rumored that she had slept with—was still sleeping with, for all he knew—Discknickers. Saturday night and Sunday morning was not a social dichotomy with Laura: she slept with strange men on Saturday night and merely overslept with them the next morning. It was her only vocation. Everything else was an alias. A shadow artist. A shadow friend. A shadow lover. A shadow woman. A shadow person making a phone call.

"Did you get through?"

"What?"

"Calling your grandmother?"

"Oh yuh. Yes," said Laura.

A look was exchanged.

A *knowing* look.

They smiled, dividing a thought that neither spoke. She was convinced he knew nothing. But Laura was mistaken. Laura was good at being mistaken.

Once when her name came up at the office by way of a Mutrux comment regarding Eugene's complaint about the insistent subterranean hum of Laura's neurotic jealousies coupled with her own deceit

and surreptitious behavior, R. Bangs Chasuble with the queenly demeanor typical of him and a fussy limp wrist breezily quoted Cecil Parker's comment on Ingrid Bergman in *Indiscreet*: "There is no sincerity like a woman telling a lie."

XXXVII
Screwball Gothic

Laura did not love Eyestones. She didn't hate him. At times, parts of her felt both. It was her stupid fate not so much to have to believe the lies she told others as to have to accept the lies in her own life. But sneakily she was not going to tell him that anyone else was in her life until it was clear someone indeed was. Love and hate were terms. Other people for Laura did not really register in such matters. She did not feel the asperity of such notions. She was outside—beyond—such choices. She thought only of herself, in getting by, in living comfortably, in eating well, in finding a man—or men—and in not having to work in the attempt to achieve any of it. As he had seen repeatedly, whenever he tried to question her about where she was going in life, for her own benefit, her heart sealed up, as soundless and as airless and as remote as the moon. He looked around the room. He recalled one night a winter ago when she was ill bringing soup to her and reading Whittier's "Snowbound" to her by candlelight, when her interest, sadly, like the cheerless sun in that poem, "sank from sight before it set."

"So those are the Craven Slucks?" queried Eugene, pointing to the hand-cranked yellow flier of the group in their pretentious leathers. *And I was a musician?* He recalled himself as a student playing a violin concerto by Carlovicz and the vulgar but splashy "Souvenir de Spa" by Servais. That was in another lifetime on another planet.

"Can't you read? Their name's written on Je—" She stopped

abruptly in mid-word with a half-embarrassed, half-malicious smile as if catching a mistake and instead chose to point. "On that guy's jacket." Did her cheeks color? She folded her arms and awkwardly grinned with that wide, overly proclamative red mouth and, flapping her ornithomimic arms, said, "Sorry, Porpoise Puppy, I can't help myself."

"Who are you," asked Eugene, "The Four Tops?"

Laura grew cool. Eugene, who had often felt that coldness coming from her, learned to live with it as a condition of knowing her, trying to accept the inimitable discrepancy between will and capability. It was strange, however, that in an unlikely way her rooms had a toxic effect on him whenever he visited her, which over the course of the years that he knew her had only happened three or four times. Suicide Alley, he secretly called it. Nightmare Abbey. Bluegate Fields. Whenever he suggested that she move somewhere else, she would curse the fact of her high rent, a lament she made in all weathers and with tree-butting stubborness, but fail to mention how Curbstepper had several times lowered it for her, a subject that Eugene, closing his eyes with a growing sense of exasperation, avoided whenever the subject came up, such were its unsavory implications and meanings, but as Laura had bad short-term memory and often asked for money from him she invariably blundered when referencing her rental fee by never using the same figure twice, a sum that over the course of time was usually reported in diminishing returns.

She opened her refrigerator. "Want something—?" "To eat?" he asked. "There's nothing in there." On one shelf was a jar of bulk mustard, a bitten Chipwich, and an unwrapped, half-eaten, encrusted quesadilla that smelled. He had also noticed a jar of expired olives and turned mayonnaise. "You can drink some of that vanilla extract, if you want; it's 35 percent alcohol." She laughed with insouciance, picking up a glass that she casually wiped with a hand-towel, that nexus of cross-contamination in kitchens. "We use to take dope hits off it way back when, me and Weezie. Are you surprised?" "You're joking," he said. She walked over, reached into the back of the refrigerator, took out a small package of stale Hostess Sno-Balls, shrugged, and with her glass of milk nipped at them, taking a bite, taking a sip, taking a bite, taking a sip. Eugene would have laughed if it had not been so sad. It was high cuisine there, unfortunately. She mostly ate out but occasionally did a tuna melt or a casserole with broken potato-chip

crusts or door-stopper brownies or a pie that—she once gave him a piece—tasted like a storm window. As Eugene talked with her, he realized he had never seen red nails on a woman that did not make the most fragile of fingers seem blunt and soiled. Her upside-down notions defeated all his attempts to change her ways, but her unsinkable urge to unvanish always left him with a feeling that she needed his help. She remained contentious, never, never content. "Won't your father help you out a bit?" She coldly looked back at him. What was it he so disliked in her empty stare as she sat there, an empty Mettlach stein with a wagging metal lid of a head? The growing indistinctness of Laura's anger or peevishness or disgust was as inexplicable as the closeted nature of her affairs, which were even more bizarre because the whole concept of sharing was foreign to her utterly. What we do not say! How we cannot say it! Living her life, excusing it by *pretending* to live it, for she did nothing, a way of throwing shade. Shape-shifting. Over the years, month after month, day in and day out, as he had tried not to see her, she harassed and annoyed the bejesus out of him, telephoning him, appearing on his doorstep, always insistently repeating, "I miss your company, and it's so lonely listening to the wind and rain beating against the windows and the constant traffic noises here" and "I need you" and "Please don't desert me, please?" He heard: *I need someone to take care of me and need to be with other men.*

"I hate this place."

"You said that."

"I do."

"It just needs—"

"What? *What?*"

"Tidying," he said softly. "I don't think it would be so bad with a coat of paint."

"*I said* I *don't like it! Don't you ever listen?* Me! Me! Me! Me, a name I call myself! A preposition or, I don't know, proposition or *whatever*, OK? Me as in Do Re Mi! OK?" she hooted. "OK?" She was in an awful mood. It was in such states that Eugene realized it was because she was too moody and too foundering and too self-conscious to have much personality. She lived betwixt and between, not even living but merely shunting, or, better, being shunted in a kind of brainless and insentient, unreflective slap-washing like a general tidal current that runs east of the flood and west of the ebb.

"Get out," said Eyestones. "*Face* getting out. Rely on yourself. You're

always looking for shortcuts."

"I'm not brave."

"Fair enough," he said, remembering Quangtri. "But courage is not the absence of fear, only the disregard of it. Work at it. For your own control."

He heard the echo of his own sententiousness. It was merely the same palaver from the "Remember-that-to-her-that-overcometh-is-promised-the-hidden-manna" school of thought. He also could not compete with her unmatched capacity for deflecting criticism. Why was she so hidebound about being helped? She resisted all—all—attempts to rescue her.

Laura sat down. "I hate this place. And I fucking hate my *life*," she snapped and angrily kicked aside a pile of rejected LPs, old Wampsville favorites now marked for a garage sale, which shot across the floor, revealing the gum-colored album covers of all her former favorite groups and singers, a true revelation to Eyestones as blackly depressing as her mood that preterimposterous afternoon: Bread, Yanni, Zamfir and His Pan Flute, John Tesh, Barry Manilow, Up with People, Barbra Streisand, Neil Diamond, Wayne Newton, K-Tel's *25 Polka Greats*, *The Living Legend of Eddy Arnold*, Hall and Oates, Kenny G.—singers and groups that she now so utterly repudiated that she would not even mention their names. It was interesting to him. Was change by any solid definition inherently brave? Why was change in her always an about-face? Didn't hysterics often have erotic fits, sensory hallucinations, vivid sexual dreams? Was the disordered mind often—always?—sexual? Always mixed messages. Changed opinions. Altered states. Laura had no "creep" strength and deteriorated under stress and pressure. Grief was indeed experienced privately as opposed to, say, happiness with friends, thought Eyestones, who had a sudden picture of Laura Warholic lying there dead in the loneliness of that impossible apartment with a pre-suicidal farewell in lipstick on a bathroom mirror as in some noir film.

It was classic indirection. To him it was exactly like the confusion all uniformed and self-validating policemen enjoy making by way of the traffic jams they often purposely create, letting chaos prevail, in order to look important in the midst of the chaos, or, similarly, the perplexity that venal, smug, stupid professors cause in classrooms by pretentiously overcomplicating simple problems in order to bewilder hapless students and so appear more brilliant. The odd truth was that Eugene,

who felt a parallel vice in himself, saw enough in his own shortcomings to keep himself from judging her: *I disbelieve in myself because I no longer believe that there is a secret something inside that, when I pray, seems worthy enough to merit it be answered.*

Was he not using her himself, by cagey indirection, to study all the threnody-befucked oddities of love and sex? Was he himself a threat by example, an interlocutor, a videophile who cared for nothing but only to learn? Worse, as he listened to her, time after time, was he not uncaring, distracted as he was by looking with love into the winter sky toward that hopeful constellation and his scintillant nebula?

They sat there in silence. Eugene, who would have once fought to straighten her out, had given up. At one time, it would have seemed obscene. He had been true blue to her from the first time they met. Long before he had seen Rapunzel, he had given up on Laura not only because he knew she did not love him, or anybody, but because she was unfaithful, to anything—had no faith. To the true heart, but to any fool as well, it is understood that there are always better-looking people, for anybody, far prettier girls, much handsomer men, to be seen with, to talk to, to walk with along the beach, to share dreams with to live and die for. While fidelity understands this, love blesses it. Was that not what love was? The acceptance of someone in spite of—indeed, often for—their faults? Laura had neither the belief nor conviction of it. Cheating for her, or at least needing to, was an ongoing policy, the matrix, the mechanics, of merely waiting for the opportunity to do so. Eyestones was still trying to understand her, a vow he took upon returning from their cross-country trip. What did E. M. Cioran say, "Happy in love, Adam would have spared us history"? But it got him nowhere. Laura seemed doomed in a kind of *folie circulaire* to walk around and around, no longer in her usual affectless manner, robotic and unreadable, but now out there on the far borders with an "I-fear-I-may-be-going-mad" stare that gave her the beset, worried look of Gyro Gearloose. Around the time they first met, she once despondently threatened to jump off the Citizens Bank building next to where she worked if he did not love her, while later that very same week he had heard she had been making secret liaisons, not only with black Jamm the Wesort, but with some mysterious bald man named Harry whose name Eyestones's typist had given her in passing when, driven by jealousy, she had telephoned that woman Kate to try to ascertain whether Eugene Eyestones had once had an affair with *her!*

Laura suspected everybody. She despised prep-school types and automatically hated girls with names like Schuyler and Hunter and Tenley and dismissed them as shapes. She would never flash through a copy of *Elle* or *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar* without low-rating the models whom she disliked for their tiny heads and long necks and couture bodies and smooth hair and uncomplicated, photogenic features, excoriating their chalk-white skin and kicky walks and phony vague hauteur. "Dipshit with a bag in front," Laura would cattily mutter. "'A woman with a Cross bag wishes to be seen by two people,'" Eugene would often quote, citing a once-famous, no longer used advertising slogan, "'the man she likes best and'"—he would playfully nudge Laura—"'the woman she likes least.'" Oddly enough, she was a label-slut herself. But any woman walking by wearing a Michael Kors sweater or showing off an Armani jacket or sporting a DKNY bag would instantly incur her wrath. She hated women with dimples especially and was fully convinced that those who had them revealed them only to flirt! She could become insanely jealous of almost anyone female: of girls of thirteen, of older women, of pretty women, of smart women, of girls who smelled as clean as guestroom soap, of dumb women, of short women, of tall women, of women on buses and of women on trains, of male-friendly, beer-drinking kickstarters in football jerseys who, bridging the gender gap, cheating, knew exactly where intimacy could be scored, of quiet women, of noisy women, of waitresses, particularly of waitresses—sexy Creedmore at Monsky's with her black-cherry hair she despised—but the sexual manifestations of jealousy that she showed in fact masked other feelings. How odd, thought Eyestones, that its presence and its absence may denote abnormality *or* normality! Was it that she recognized her own youth was gone? That she was now finding grey hairs? That her own face was drawn and unsensuous? The she had oxheart-red hands and was thin as a mechanic's wife with wrists and legs as straight as copper-piping in their near-emaciation? That her skin had the nap of corn-snow? That even at her age her eyes were archwitchishly crinkled at the edges with crow's-feet? Jealousy with Laura, as with many women, it seemed to him, often meant not that she felt desire or was passionately in love with someone, but rather that she was infuriated with herself, often desperately speculating from the lost and unhappy and scheming delitescence within her that if anyone ever truly took her own measurement, he would ultimately never be satisfied with *her*. It was a faux emotion that only aped real passion.

Desire manqué. Dissembling. Farce. Posturing. Mad Dionysians, he knew, were always projecting their excessive and morbid sexual hysteria onto other people, but now that jealousy, anger, those erototropic drives, those deep, primal, nameless cravings, those riddling morbid urgencies, seductive strategies, and involuntary lusts represented, he realized, a distinct line of self-distrust and self-loathing, even if it did seem that she was in the hell of love. It had to do with belittling the object of her love, so that she herself could find height. Such people do not exactly festoon the trees! My God, thought Eyestones, why has Ratnaster never interviewed *her?*

Ironically, Eyestones had inadvertently found on Laura's windowsill a lame brochure into which were stuck several receipts going back a year from the Velour Motel, a low box of broken shadows and unshapely brick, where in a spate of nightly chicane Laura of an evening ended up with some local creep or shady, indeterminate cum-traveler or sex-drudge trying to find satisfaction in a brief biological interlude. It did not obtain anymore, as he thought lovingly of Rapunzel, but Laura had a great talent for taking the heart out of any situation that gave him the slightest joy even in the best of days, which was bad enough, until he realized that with her, no matter the man, she was only temporizing. There was someone new in her life, it was clear. Vice, like virtue, takes steps. Was it someone from her past? A new lover? Or someone purely imaginary? When someone has shut us out of this world, he knew, she will for better or worse build one of her own. He felt sad for Laura—anger, however, is close to grief—but he found it soon hard to feel much of anything. Anticipation is, in a sense, inverted recollection. There was no foundation to build on in any level with her. Love was an orphan in their midst. He had seen and felt it from that very first meeting with her at North Station, finding in her lack of principles and want of feeling that the poor thing not only had not the slightest conception herself of what commitment meant but basically of what it was to be a woman. As was invariably the case with Eyestones, with one perception came a balancing truth, and with it, again, from Laura another idea for a column for *Quink* by default. Had not Hosea the prophet still loved his adulteress wife Gomer in spite of her sins? Raised three children not his? It was the first time, he realized, we were given a concept of Jehovah as a god of love, not merely of power and of justice and of mercilessness—no lack of those, that was for sure—which immediately brought him back to an immediate

concern.

"Laura, look, I didn't come over only to drop off that typewriter. There is something else I wanted to . . . well, bring up. I am worried about you," he said, wistfully regarding the room that with its warped walls and sunken floors and poor light looked like a geosynclinal trough. An upended Elmo chair. Empty Big Gulp cups under the bed. Crumpled popcorn bags here and there. Unreturned videocassettes. It was redolent with years of mustiness. Petrifaction. Was it the closet that gave off such an acrid odor of bad water, mushrooms, and bracket fungus or that pile of bent shoes or simply the drab, communicating foreignness of the entire listing wooden crate of this building on River Street? If the business axiom "Build in the path of progress" held, this place was an edificial dead end. The way he got it, Laura was frankly used to living in squats like this with various transients, half-educated no-hopers, and dump-hunters to help share paying the rent. He remembered that she was of Polish extraction, born like collapse in the grey Cayuga swamps near the slough of Syracuse. Wampsville! Sister of three "double-yokers." Unmarried name Shqumb, which of course sounded like some kind of anagram. Awful parents who hated her, one niggardly, the other a nitwit. All monologues, no dialogue. Everyone stuck in hopeless gridlock. Life on the back wheels. One tragic incident after another in a life of failure and cloth-eared injustice. Eyestones asked, "Did you hear me?"

Ignoring him, Laura inquisitively banged her head and asked, "Have you seen my banana clip?" Stumbling over her LPs and fumbling through a pile of unboxed cassettes, she picked one up and shoved it into her recorder. "Do you know *Live at Budokan*? 'Surrender'? 'Need Your Love'? 'Clock Strikes Ten'?" He groaned. "All right, I'm sick of Cheap Trick, too. But wait." She began quickly flashing through another pile of albums and yanked one out. "The Buttholes!" she cried. "*Independent Worm Saloon!* Cool! Did you know that Gibby Haynes of the Buttholes, who dresses like a biker, has a crossed pipe-and-syringe tattoo on his arm?" She picked another cassette. "Boss Hog! I've seen them at the Middle East. Cutting edge! Everyone was doing hits of ecstasy. Boss Hog is Jon Spencer's other band. He's a slight, skinny, white-hipster kid from New York City. I saw the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion in San Francisco—I was like *whoa!* Listen closely! When he does that amped-up blues thing, I mean audiences always go wild. It is *sooo* trippy! Live, local, and late-breaking! I've mas-

turbated to it. My parents didn't object. Do you, Snoopy Dog? Listen to that idiosyncratic singing-style full of growls, hiccups, shouts, and wailing." It was Laura's new vocabulary. She was only reconfirming that she had met a new guy, some rocker or hair-metal fop or ephedrine *cocinero* from some concert or record shop or "scene" or other. She tossed her hair in a 9.5 degree fling. "But it rocks out in a serious way, it's not jokey, it's what guys at the Middle East call 'killer'—you know, as in 'killer riffs,' 'killer hooks,' a 'killer set!'? Take-no-prisoners blues-rock. Bang your head! Bang your head! Feel the noise!" Across Laura's face came a sudden look of panic. "*Jesus Christ, don't hit those pipes, will you*?" She gulped, terrified that her landlord—who knew that code—might hear the knocks and come up. "*Watch it!* Look, sit over there." What had so startled her? he wondered. A picture suddenly flashed into his mind of Barbara Stanwyck in *Lady of Burlesque* playing the cheap, nothing-shocks-me stripper "Dixie" whose real name in the movie—for she had her own enhancing persona—was the less exotic Deborah Hoople, toughly muttering, "Later, honey. I've been startled by experts." Confused somewhat, Eugene quickly moved. Unlike her visual double and more disingenuous on-screen sister, Laura looked terribly flummoxed and listened a minute before she resumed. "Anyway, John Spencer also has this weird handmade antenna-like thing that produces a goofy outer-space sound and strange feedback effects; he fools around with it during solos, sings through a little gizmo that distorts his voice, and also plays harmonica well." She pointed to him and asked, "Have you, like, even *heard* of the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion? Or hair metal? Or punk-pop-alterna-ska stuff à la Morphine, Rancid, or the Death Shovels? Cemeterian and the Death Residents? As if you would be into psychotropical funk! If my aunt had been a man, she'd have been my uncle, right?" Laura laughed. "Needless to say, the Slucks are a much, *much* greater band. They only land for fuel, baby! I mean they are *so* uptown." Was her sex drive, Eugene began to wonder, cyclical or periodic? *She was thirty-six years old!* Halfway through life! Like Prufrock! Sterility. But no mermaids singing here. Only going to motels with strangers! Stealing watches! It was not possible, but it was! When you cannot live life, thought Eugene, unreality is less a sorrow than a sanctuary.

"So," asked Laura, "are you interested in hearing the Slucks? This group in Cambridge I like? Whom I told you about? They're geniuses."

He said nothing.

"They are *so* ahead. So today! Did you hear what I said?"

She snatched out the tape and walked into the bathroom. She was sulking. Almost fifteen minutes passed in silence. Was her problem a failure to listen or an impulse to deceive? Trying, Eugene called out, "I was only saying—"

"Yes, yes, yes," Laura said, cutting him off as she abruptly returned. "I want to improve," she sighed, sitting down with a whuft. She sighed again. She began picking her teeth with her ATM card, as if having chosen not to read his thoughts she had come to her own conclusions. She got up exasperatedly and asked, "Do you want to go get a caffe latte? I want an ice-blended." She had heard enough of his no guts/no glory speeches. She sat down again, but said nothing more. Her generic defense came with a stock vocabulary.

Eyestones unhooked his thick eyeglasses and wiped his tired eyes. He was frustrated. It was always there in trying to help her, the *via invia*, the pathless path, the voyage full of difficulties. "You don't even listen."

"I do," said Laura Aural, standing up.

"You're standing behind me," he said.

"So?"

"Don't," he said. "Please."

She shook her inner ear with a probing little finger,_withdrew it to find a speck of wax, and rubbed it on her jeans. She sat down, put up her feet, leaned back, exhaled, and stared at him—her pupils unequal—with a kind of stupid, open-eyed lack of cooperation. She saddened him. Was not that one theory of successful acting: try to make the subject of the scene the other person rather than yourself? Whatever she was thinking, he did not know. He only knew he pitied her. He did not love her. They were emotions that occupied different spaces. "If it is significant to say 'This is red,' it cannot be significant to say 'This is loud.'"

Where *was* she?

Didn't she *care*?

The search is proof of what we *are*!

"You jilted Mutrux." He paused. "Didn't you?"

Her eyes, widening, popped like a Lapland owl's.

"Nosy?"

"He told me all about it," said Eyestones.

"Do tell."

"It's true."

"He's a fucking sneak."

"Wasn't that what you were with him?"

Laura turned her head and frowned at the walls as if she were trying to look through them.

"'Entering in silence,' as Charlie Chan used to say, 'professional habit.'"

"He was seeing other people."

Of course, of course. As soon as a person finds that she cannot go to Paris, Eyestones realized, she finds a reason that she cannot go to Paris.

It was the Double-Talk Express.

"He told me you were. You told people I was. They say you are," he said. "Box it about. Conjugate it as you will."

"He was!"

"Look, please," Eugene interrupted, holding up his hand. "Mutrux hates you. That doesn't matter. But it's worse than that." She put her hands on her hips, a bold flaunting listener. "I think Curbstepper is dangerous," said Eugene, regarding her air of nonchalance and tepid curiosity. How he had once pitied her! At one time he would have taken her dear sweet self to bundle her in the warmest blankets and hold her in his arms and kiss her face until she melted. No longer. It was not even a regret. He felt uneasy for tending to see her the way Caravaggio painted, through torch light, and secretly felt that if she had just said—blurted—"I'm so lonely, so alone, I wish you could find me," he might have. There were even times when he assured her she was pretty, but she never developed enough confidence to accept a compliment and usually responded to his praise with some goofy facial or physical action, as though trying to divert his gaze from her looks. Was her obsession with staying thin, he wondered, an obsession with emptiness? Eugene thought he cared once, he did. Now when he regarded her he was only looking through sheets of red rain, painfully thinking of her mad isolation and how her parents, hating each other, troubled by their daughter's chaotic life and irresponsibilities, a matter already compounded by their having given birth to three disappointing children, had wanted desperately to be rid of her. Was it not Henry David Thoreau who wrote that when woodpeckers start to visit your woods it is time to cut them down? It was true, he felt. We should

never fail to be careful about what we get used to. It was so grey in that apartment. Laura folded, then refolded, her arms, looking sexless as culottes. Eugene was aware that in speaking with her he used a lot of his favorite words—*dialectic, try, solidarity, unique, conscience, begin, begin again, results, hope, paradox, irony*—and avoided others, *bakery, bakery, bakery,* words that like a warm wind blew tropically into his sleepiness, and he leaned his head on the sofa, abstractly watching the dark, dark windows and recalling with incomprehensible sadness how one cold night in melancholy desperation she had come walking into a movie theater in Harvard Square, blundering from row to row, loony, lost, looking for him while he sat alone watching Buster Keaton in the 1925 classic *Seven Chances*, one of his favorite movies, along with *Shane* and the music of Victor Young ("That movie?" quacked Laura. "An exercise in suckhood!") and, although he saw her, he did not acknowledge her but watched her for the longest time perched there alone in the dark, sitting with her legs straight out, like a Pueblo woman, but looking so forlorn, so deserted by what seemed life itself, that with a lump in his throat he could not help but get up and go over to the seat next to her and put his arm around her while fighting back hot tears. He did not love her so. There was nothing to be done but accept it.

It was in the catenary hang. The essential shape assumed from two disparate points by a perfectly flexible, inextensible, enigmatical chain whose algebraic symbol is so complicated that a numeral will not express it. Geometricians avoid the number and give it the letter *e*. It is there in the snail-shell, the flexible cord, the fir-cone. This is the universe we have, he thought, what we face, what we are subject to, spokes, radii, lines.

They sat there together. He noticed that she seemed edgier than an octagon. "Do you want me here? Laura?" She said nothing. "You don't want me here, do you?" And then she gave one of the strangest, most unlikely and inflectionless replies she had ever made, a remark descending out of bleakness itself but in its ravening truth one of the most accurate. She said, "Your desire for knowledge brought you here."

"May I question why you now keep your telephone in your bathroom?" he asked her. The wind seemed to move a human sigh through her. She banged up, suddenly alert, as if looking for her lost head. But he was seeking something else. Wasn't it Wittgenstein's notion that the meaning of a proposition is the method by which it is verified?

"Why not?"

"Why?"

"Can't a person do what she wants?" asked Laura. "Loud ringing bothers me when I sleep."

A lie has a body.

It was growing dark in the room. Cars went by down below, flashing arcs of light across the ceiling. The shadows grandguignoling down and across the wall were so deep as he lay there, sleepless, awake with sadness, that the only angles he could make out were the mast of her extended nose and the white of her open eyes. Cautiously, Laura lay down on the bed. Her long inapposite body, her thin arms, her bony hands, the oval plate of her face, her big hair, those potato-chip ears waiting for an ear-tuck or perichondrioplasty, all, all of them, indistinct in shadows, gobsmacked down into a slow darkening fadeout.

Eyestones rested an hour in Laura's apartment, thinking of Rapunzel, the quintessence of *yin*, whose angelic face became part of the ceiling above, appearing like a Fra Lippo Lippi angel, as if, wondrously, over the nave of his private church in his private parish. "Come, sleep," he thought, with aposiopetic Beaumont, "and, with thy sweet deceiving, lock me in delight awhile." He whispered a thought to God. The benefit of real prayer, it occurred to him, is that when aware you are pious, that is your comfort. Rapunzel. You could read by the light of her smile, her blonde porcelain beauty. O swirl of stars! Orion's nebula! With a buoyant white force Eyestones knew he was in love with her. He was suddenly restless and by 8:30, deciding to leave, said goodbye to Laura, tangled on her side of the bed, mutt-snoring away under a big dead blanket and a chaotic pile of grey sheets. "Keep your hands above the blanket," whispered Eugene who, having got up quietly and slipping out in a matter of seconds, took the old wooden stairs three at a time and drove back across the river to his house.

Upon waking, Laura checked her watch, stood up, ran to the telephone, and quickly dialed a number at the club in Central Square called the Middle East.

"Jeff?"

XXXVIII
Kid with a Replaceable Head

At the *Quink* office the following week, R. Bangs Chasuble, who loved gossip, slipping around singing a sibilant version of the Stylistics' "Betcha by Golly Wow," with arch and ornate disapproval, the better to seem a friend, saw Eyestones at the coffee-and-donut nook and extending his little finger—the way he always shook hands—took the occasion to make an announcement. "I saw Laura Warholic at the movies in Harvard Square about a month ago." "Laura? You saw her at the movies?" "Indeed, Eugenio," replied the movie critic, choo-chooing his arms for panache, "'that's where every lulubelle goes, every Thursday evening with her swell beaux, rubbing elbows,' and I would not forget that particular day because it was on October 12, The Day Rebecca Died as in Du Maurier," and then finishing his bit did a terpsichorean foot-slap with an extended open hand to add, "Ta-da!" He closed his eyes, dreamily. "That day was treat day. I had spent most of the afternoon at the MFA in the eighteenth-century room looking at—staring *achingly* upon—George Romney's superb *John Bensley Thornhill as a Boy*, 1784—maybe my favorite work of art. That and the Apollo Prassinos. I love the museum and try to go every Thursday. Anyway, you can have all the white marbles you want of Praxiteles, Myron, Polyclitus, and Phidias's gods in gold and ivory. I'll take that bronze *Green Apollo* by Unknown any day of the week! I love beautiful young men. They break your heart. Do you know John Singleton Copley's *Boy*

with Squirrel? Henry Pelham, Copley's half brother, in portrait? I must have mentally combed that boy's soft hair a thousand and forty-one times! The MFA for me could be an afternoon at Groton. How about that georgous miniature by Nicholas Hilliard of long auburn-haired, twenty-two-year-old Henry Wrothesly, the third Earl of Southampton. Shakespeare himself—read sonnet twenty—harbored constant erotic longings for him! I also have to say that I adore the matchless *Eros* of Centocelle. Roman, second century A.D. Do you happen to know the statue of that boy? Long hair, most of his weight on his left leg? The right one relaxed? Just the delicate curvature of that torso, the curled hair! The sweetest face in the Vatican Collection!" He sighed. "Oh my God Roman boys. Almost any of the statues of Hadrian's love object, Antinoüs, the beautiful boy from Bithynia, his face crowned with the richest ringlets yet seen in art! I especially adore the one in the Museo Nazionale in Naples." He sighed. "Ever hear of the Stendhal Syndrome?" He paused. "I give my soul away, dear Eugene. 'It's a sacrilegious thing to lay one's head on another's destiny,' as Miriam Hopkins tells Donald Crisp in *The Old Maid*, but I'm afraid I cannot help it. Oh, but the Romney! I generally try to visit my handsome young companion weekly. It is to my mind one of the few reasons for staying alive, Eyestones, given so many valid arguments to the contrary. Such a creature! Such a heart-cracking, golden-hued, raspberry-lipped jewel of a boy!" He sighed. "Well, that was my afternoon. Then I want to the movies."

"Wait, wait," asked Eugene. "Was *The Night Porter* with Charlotte Rampling playing?"

"You knew?"

"Yes."

"Positively, Mr. Gallagher?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Shean."

"How did you know?" asked his gay friend with a celebrity show of surprise, pausing not without some alarm, for he was famously nervous, pulling back and forth over his knuckles one of the many iron rings he wore, while peering over the top of his eyeglasses rimmed with cherry-red frames. Chasuble was fussily dressed, as usual, wearing a silk tulip-and-mauve jacket with an abalone pin on one of the lapels set in silver. A scent of strong cologne perfumed the air. He sported brown-and-white alligator shoes, although his walk, like a lame duck, vitiated somewhat a style he hoped to achieve, a message he rather

vainly yearned to send. He had the gay man's odd, elongated upper torso, an insistently geometric haircut, its line cut sharply flat along the lower back of his head, feminine buttocks, a peculiar swinging motion of the hips, and a gallery-worth of kinetic facial expressions that in a kind of pleading way were offered for the most part in request of support for the endless annoyances levied against him from one day to the next by a tasteless and indifferent world. His skin had a sort of yellowish tint. Unattractively, his nostril holes each had a different shape. On this particular morning his face seemed somehow more bloated than ever, the effect not only of a late night but of earlier having for a pick-me-up a bowl of cabinet pudding and a slice of chocolate cake which he always eccentrically ate in tandem. Lachrymal sacs rather like stuffed pillows sagged under his slanted, almost oriental, bullet-shaped eyes, and his large head sitting between his shoulders seemed often precariously unbalanced on his large porpoise-shaped body, which while reflecting the lines of the fish had none of the sleekness.

"It was the midnight showing, right?"

"Take a guess," replied his friend, prissily smoothing down the wide-pleated pool of his trousers with a fragile feel. "Weird-o-rama time for cinéastes. Out we creep into the moonlight world! Bats, owls, lemurs, me."

"Isn't it a movie about a furious, sharp-fanged, horn-blossomed virago with muscles out to here who in the name of what I believe are today euphemistically called 'gender issues' cheerfully destroys men? It's Laura's favorite film. She never misses a single showing apparently, a fact that remains—you explain it—one of her major boasts."

"Not really. It's basically a victim/slave allegory with a bottomless fund of hankery-pankery."

"A lure for Laura, to be sure. Sounds the tocsin. She'd be there with bells on."

"On that subject—"

"Subject?"

"Miss Laura."

"Yes."

"I saw her in the lobby before the movie. I saw her in the lobby after the movie. Don't beanpoles like her with twig bodies know that they should always repeat always avoid thin sweaters, light hosiery, long necklaces, center verticals—like a severe button row, which can shriek how'dya do!—and chunky or heavy-looking shoes? So tell me, who

dresses her, Janitor in a Drum?" Chasuble wagged his friend's sleeves, "Oh and that astronaut's-wife haircut she wears with the long pin-straight brown hair thing? *Oh dear Jesus*, I thought. What she needs is a flip and a twist and a cut and a color, OK? It's like a birthday hat on a cactus—needles where you want ears! Thinness has always seemed to me a kind of horrible tall anyway. I would rather be smothered in bunny fur. Were those earthworms for earrings? What is that all about, channeling Queen Alexandria? Let's see, what else? Forget the put-down, I'm trying. Oh, and try some Sabrina-style flats, Cookie Fruit," he said, apostrophizing absent Laura. "And shoulder pads on a tin flute? I don't think so. Hugeosity for the most part sucks. I used to share rooms with the most obnoxious bitch on two feet, my ex-live-in Larry, who used to insist on wearing shoulder-pads far bigger than Betty Grable's, and that man was, like, over six feet, which was absolutely queenious!" He paused. "Did I tell you that your friend was wearing a leopardskin blouse? A spotted horror like Noah Beery's in *Red River*! I'll make a major wager she thinks it's sexy. Thanks a house, kitten, but I'll pass, all right? You have to be the right person for animal prints, Eyestones. You see it in flower lounges. In the beyond-crapulous Sixties film, *Goodbye, Again,* button-cute Tony Perkins, he of the stork shoulders, in one of the many bad scenes in a movie composed of nothing but bad scenes sits lugubriously sipping a drink in a bar with booths of leopard-spot upholstery! It can have an ugly walk to it, leopardskin. Good for a Wichita yenta, I suppose. I had a Bulgarian queen-friend who would wear nothing else. It was a big 1960s fascination. Natalie Wood sports a long leopardskin coat in *Penelope*—1966—full length, with a collar like the animal's ears, far prettier "—he went silent as a staring Gnorm walked by and snapped, "What's the matter, dippy, see a parade going by?"—"far prettier, I was going to say, than the tacky one Karen Black wore in *Five Easy Pieces*. I will still settle for the glossy nonpareil that marvelous Jane Wyman wore in *The Lost Weekend*, the envy of all the bitches in the preposterously-called Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences every time she wore it to one of their annual awards presentations on fright night." Chasuble adjusted his eyeglass frames. "Who's forgetting Norma Desmond's mad turban and matching collar in *Sunset Boulevard* or those jungly seat covers in that marvelous antedeluvian Isotta-Fraschini she owns, the ultimate star car, which of course for film purposes perfectly imitates the diva's own personal driving esurience, but now don't get me started."

He paused. "What I live for is to accessory-dish, don't mind me." He leaned closer. "But, I mean, you can tell what your, um, friend's apartment looks like, can't you? No Duncan Phyfe sofas, right?" he asked, his tongue in cheek. "No, um, Directoire-inspired tubular brass, I'll rub a dub, no floor-to-ceiling bookcase-étagères arranged against lacquered tortoiseshell-vinyl walls, right? Wait, don't tell me—I see Daisy Con-Tac paper everywhere. Cheap aroma candles. Too many little tables. Miss Laura shop-hopping at Bowl and Board! Seventies music playing, something like Roger Williams's 'Theme from *Somewhere in Time*.'"

Eyestones, no expert in the chemistry of fashion mysteries, thought *nothing explains everything.*

"My general picture of her? Mmm, hard to say." He took his time. "I see something low-budget with Keenan Wynn." He laughed out loud. "I have *no* problem envisioning her like frumpy Stella Dallas witlessly walking into the elegant Morrison family living room with her leopard-spot clothes, high-top shoes, and that hideous Snap-Crackle-and-Pop hat!" He pointed to his nose and closed his eyes to deliberate. "Have you ever had the occasion to see Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*, 1944, or *Scarlet Street*, which was made a year later? Perverse-triangle dramas for the most part in which innocent-if-you-can-imagine Edward G. Robinson with those ugly purple liver-lips of his is entrapped by trashy femme fatale Joan Bennett, with the generous complicity of course of sadistical criminal Dan Duryea?" He walked a circle. As usual, he kept flicking his fingers up and down in the air in a sort of witchy, semi-divining way. "I'd place Laura somewhere in there, looking fairly ropey." He picked up a stale cruller, frowned, and put it down. "I'm starving. I came in earlier to finish off a bunch of reviews, which I managed to do. Now I crave sugar. I'd kill for a Bush Almond or a French Crème Rollette from a box of Li-Lacs!" He waggled his fingers. "Or a truffle mocha from a Tobler box of Suprêmes. I'd like to feed Bush Almonds to the Green Apollo or to John Bensley Thornhill or to the Eros of Centocelle. Some young men. 'Only sixteen years of old,' as some nutty gypsy tells Ricardo Cortez and Kay Francis in that blundering old film *Transgression*— nineteen thirty-one!" It was not sweets alone that Chasuble liked, but they were one of his passions. He had gone out of his way, for example to have memorized the specific schema of various boxed chocolates and could discuss size, quality, shape, appearance, and assortments to— and visual directions of—

most exotic American and European one-pounders: Krums, d'Orsay, See's Candies, Galerie au Chocolates, Lenôtre, Cool's, Hofbauer, Plumbridge, Edelweiss, Van Houten, PK, etc. He knew, for example, that one got a rare Florentino (fruit gianduja) in a box of Safrotti, along with a luscious Belvedere. A whole row of chocolate-dipped glacéed Australian apricots (center row) came in Plumbridge. And in a Neuhaus box came three layers of goodies, everything from cerise kirsch to Napoleonettes to caramel cream "Le 125s." Other fascinations for him were of course his pet poodle, Oinky the Porkchop, and his two cats, James and Whistler. He collected Majolica, owned some nice tortoiseshell, kept a gallery in his head of favorite paintings—almost all oils of striking young men—and adored stuffed toys. "I'm a Plushie," he often proudly exclaimed. "I collect stuffed animals. I like bunnies best. Get out of my way when, shopping, I see one. I will roll over you like a superball. I am Auntie Pandemonium!" He winked "Find me a bunny."

Chasuble whispered to Eyestones. "Do you like my silk jacket? Excuse me if I have a fashion moment. But it drapes beautifully, don't you think? Such a fine weave. Feel the nap. I spent scads on it. Shopping?" He uttered *ohhh* in three syllables. "My passion! As Harvie Krumpet would say, 'Life is a cigarette. Smoke it to the butt.' Silk is reeled, not spun, you know. It reminds me of a special day years ago, I was only a teenager, when I stood outside, being too nervous to attend, Norman Norell's funeral—the couturier?—when Bobby Short performing on a baby grand sang a love-song from *Lady in the Dark*, 'My Ship.'" Chasuble shaking his head in a remote and plaintive way sang in an airy tremulous voice,

> "My ship has sails
> That are made of silk."

Eyestones touched his jacket. It looked gummy and wet, like a python. "Are the trousers too tight?" Chasuble asked in sort of a hopeful way.

"They look fine," said Eugene.

"Oh good," he expostulated. "As Louise Beavers says in *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, 'If you ain't eating Wham, you ain't eating ham.' But back to your skinny friend with a smile wide as a *mezzaluna*—Laura, is it? I see a self-conscious growth-spurt-victim with a loose

mouth and big gums and a low forehead. Her long thin nose tells us she craves attention. She also needs to widen her eyes; they are too small. Invest in some mahogany eye-shadow, dear. White even, and some black eyeliner, try!" He shrugged indefinably. "Chandelier earrings are *so* over."

Eyestones filled a cup with coffee from the machine, handed it to his friend, then got his own cardboard cup to fill, after fumbling one or two of them. "Watch it," giggled Chasuble, and here he wagged a finger. "As Brian Aherne tells Glenn Ford in *The Lady in Question*, 1940, 'Dropping things is the first sign of love at first sight.'" His eyes gleamed impishly. "Remember," he offered with a sardonic grin, "it's not a one-night stand if you're lying down." Eyestones let the joke pass. "So are you still thick with her?" asked Chasuble, sipping his coffee. "When's her birthday? December 20? A Capricorn. I can give you the full dope on that astrological sign. She will hate cats. She'll claim to have talents of which, I'm afraid, you'll see small proof at best. Does she paint? It's an earth sign, they're uneasy with fire signs, like rules, regulations, and, I don't know, tend to be hard-working. I never frankly think of them as having much fun. Major trouble with her father is guaranteed. A mother might be bitchy, too. A bit high-functioning in the malice department. Forget cooking: she can't tell a cake pan from a corkscrew and is big on take-out. Will read to no consequence. Zero insight into men. She will lie, of course, and be good at it. You know the drill. A little inaccuracy saves a lot of explanation? Exactly. And when you catch her in the lie, then what? The usual bullshit. You know, Delsarte pose #20—chronic remorse! She'll never say she is sorry but will be the type with a sort of thaumaturgic flourish to leave tiny, tiny gifts at your door—for example, soap, gum, a pen, et cetera—to say," here he grabbed Eyestones's lapels and mimickingly moued, "'Widdle widdle me is so sowwwy.'" He took his friend in with a look of conviction. "We are not talking munificence in the sign, Eugene, trust me. Capricorns, forgive me, are, as far as I'm concerned, the cheapest people on the planet. Tight as a duck's rectum. She would of course be neurotically into 'wellness'—and would love the *word*! Clever Mercury eggs her on to send you erotic e-mail. Oh, sorry, you don't use e-mail, that's right, but she'd do that. Desperation applies to people like this. Power is about lust. Lack of power's about desperation. I can see her in the back of some jackass's car, Mr. Whizzwell in his Chrysler sedan, fellating him with the suction force of a category-3 hurricane. I'm sorry,

Eugene, but you wanted the truth, didn't you? Other characteristics? Mmmm. Moody, cranky, undependable, earnest, purse-lipped, disapproving, trumpery-prone, voluble, unresourceful, selfish. Try those. 'Hey, where's my portion?' 'I gotta have my coffee now!' Oh God, not just any coffee. I mean a fussy latte—one of those triple skinny, no-fat, no-foam, double-soy lattes, you know, the sort of thing people in Seattle drink who have Airedales. Hypochondria is a big thing with them. Any catarrhal click in her throat, even a nose drip, will get her dithery, sending her off like anxiety's grandmother to throat doctors for years on end. And, needless to say, *nobody's* getting a generous gift at Christmas!"

They were standing by a stairwell. The Krauthammer went clumping by, heading up the stairs—she was wearing a T-shirt that read *Grow Your Own Dope: Plant a Man!*—but not before turning to pitch to Chasuble as she passed, "Cheeseball jacket." "Fungus!" snapped Chasuble, muttering low to Eyestones, "Say hello to Miss Olive Bitesnatch. Doesn't she always seem, when speaking, to be nibbling chickweed?" He nudged his friend and whispered, "'In which Piglet meets a Heffalump.'" "I heard that," said The Krauthammer. "Your mother must be a cat, 'cause you're a pussy!" "If you sit on my hand," retorted Chasuble, "I'll give you a thumbs up." "Fruitfly!" He made a box-shape with his hands and said, "Have another Crisco sandwich, Stalina!" "From *you*, whose idea of a balanced meal is a Big Mac in both hands?" "Go marry a mudnun!" "Fudgepacker!" she hissed, fumbling for the office key in her huge handbag.

"I am going to scream," moaned Chasuble, who began flicking his fingers up and down nervously, irritatedly, walking in a circle. "I will tell you right now that I cannot stand, absolutely, positively cannot *bear*, the sound of a woman rummaging in her handbag!"

"Really?" asked Eyestones.

"My mother—have I never told you this?—was an unhappy and abusive fish-witch who, after a belated divorce, with a bitter and unswerving conviction that all human relationships in matters of love become a mad struggle for power in which the partner who loves more loses more—she treated me all my life as a piñata, as if to prove it—had a way of intimidating me by just making noises. Loud noises. Alarming noises. Any noise of consequence. Breaking. Cutting. Chawnking apples. Squelching an orange when she chewed it. Making tomato gelatin in one of those shiny copper molds. Rattling. Clomping about

in hard, black shoes and reeking of that ancient old perfume 'Moment Supreme' which came in huge bottles and wearing clothes tighter than Charles Laughton in Spandex. Face it, I had, and have, an acute case of acousticophobia. But that *handbag*? My god! Car keys and house keys, lipsticks, compacts, rouge cases, coins, combs, pens and pencils, credit cards, you name it. All her fossicking around in there became, became, became, I don't know, threats! To this very day I am creeped out by a woman's handbag and the vaginal smell of them. A fish odor. A coarse, fetid bayou stink like a combination of wet dog and clothes hamper!" Clapping his head, Chasuble groaned. "What can I say? It has become for me the definition of anti-arousal! But now what am I going to add? Right. I love her." He swallowed. "Poor R. Bangs Chasuble." He swallowed again and seemed almost tearful. He paused with something like a bowed head. "Like all queers, I have to say I love the woman.

"My mother nurtured two prevailing passions: a taste for the variety and facture of American candy bars and extravagantly abusing me.

"I come from a large psycho family of seven—my youngest brother weak and social-climbing—and all the rest of them, especially my two fat sisters, conniving monsters, hateful because homely, who fleeced my aged mother of all her money who trusted them only because in their unsleeping guile they were in fact versions of her! Every Sunday they used to bring her bags of budget food and walk away each time with $100 or $200 checks for their efforts. Cold, unsparing, envious, selfish, unkind, gossiping cows with wens, whiskers, and knob noses and not a jot or tittle of honesty in either of them. I once made a kind of rhyme about my siblings: one's a fool, one's a mule, one's a shadrool, another's a tool, another one's cruel, and, as I say, my two slothful and mulish sisters *dual*—snail and shell inseparable, Heckle and Jeckle, whip and switch, warthog ugly and venomous both! All knifey smiles and dirty feet. The fattest one of them, dull as a bag of wet hair, would walk off with the pope's underwear if it were left unattended! She infiltrated my mother like a proctologist. Stole her money. Snatched jewelry. Twigged a strong box at the bank. Got the poor lady's house put in her name. It was as if she ate her whole hog, wolfing, the way she devoured everything—in this she was exactly like Ann Marie Tubb with her insatiable input of cheeseburgers, pancakes with heavy syrup, platters of Swedish meatballs—that over a lifetime has made her so obese that she ended up going around with long greasy hair, a droop-

ing paunch, wearing laceless sneakers, open, with the tongues popped up and monstrous billowing caftans that hang on her like some sort of billowing circus tent chaotically unmoored by rope pegs and guy wires. Greedy, hateful, indolent sisters with weak, chinless husbands are an archetype in the folklore of virtually every single continent from Asia to Africa to Australia, popping up like imps in every woodcut, old fabliau, opera, song, and proverb."

Eyestones thought of his own older brother Marysas and the way he preyed on people: *A man and a snake meet. The snake says, "Get out of the way or I'll kill you. You don't know who you're dealing with." "Sure I do," said the man. "You have beady eyes, you crawl on your belly. You're a lawyer." And with that he chopped off his head.*

"We have a bad pedigree," continued Chasuble. "Working-class. Sedulously unhelpful to each other. Well-schooled calumniators. You know, spreading vile gossip about you as soon as your back is turned. Without intelligence, we'd all be selling fruit. I've never known such greed. You couldn't throw a pie-knife in any direction in the house I grew up in without impaling a thief. Brains do not make manners, believe me. Good families show character; ours never measured up, for some miserable reason. Too few generations to purge vulgarities, I dare say. My sisters' spouses are even worse. Hypochondriac and melancholic husbands with weevil faces and no end of bad ways to hurt and insult you. Oh, and the *wives* of my brothers? Dopey, fat, near-illiterate lard-asses in muumuus to a one, lording their parvenuism over each other and duller than dead brook-trout. I should bite my tongue off for telling you all of this, I suppose, but I've been struggling with a burden as heavy as a pilgrim's bundle all these years, and I'm only trying to be honest."

Eyestones leaned forward and said, "Do you have nothing to do with them anymore?"

"*No*-thing," he sing-songed.

"A pity."

"Why? My older brother, a kind of trollish figure, bald, fanged, nervous, and blear-eyed—Dogberry in the flesh—who felt a sibling rivalry toward me always heartlessly referred to me as 'Romans 1:18'—look it up, dear man—but they were all bad, and what they did to persecute me? Don't even! I used to revert for safety to the closed darkness of movie houses. I saw *Charlie Chan at the Wax Museum* something like twelve times. That's normal? I still celebrate Garbo's birthday every

September 18 wearing a lipstick-red foulard around my neck and on my head my Ninotchka-hat from Paris"—he touched his tongue between his upper and lower teeth with a knowing, impish grin and shook his body, thrilling to it, as if shaking off water—"*in* the privacy of my rooms, thank you! I used to go down to P'town. I would go partying at Capt'N Jacks or the Little Bar at the A House. But let's face it, there is no trade"—he made quotation marks—"anymore." He shrugged. "I mean, what have you done for me lately, right? Rinse a sock, try, huh? I take myself to movies, that's what I do. I owe my salvation to the movies, Eyestones. House lights dimming in a cinema constitute a kind of lullaby for me to this very day."

He paused. "Oh, my family. Growing up, I spent entire afternoons just sitting in my room listening to the records of Vicki Carr and crying. It is they who froze me out," owned Chasuble. "Save Mother, of course, for whom I have bowed and butled for half a century now but, let's be frank, who is getting a bit soft around the edges and closer by the minute to Gagaville." He did an imitation here that was a cross between Bea Lillie mis-putting on a hat and a sibilant rendition with all the right gestures of "A Bar on the Piccola Marina," the Noël Coward song that wittily describes how love came to Mrs. Wentworth Brewster and sent her round the bend. "My mother killed me sexagesimacally, by the minute, the sixtieth part of an hour, by the second, the sixtieth part of a minute, and in sixty ways. She has had her just complaints with me, I daresay. She caught me rouging my earlobes one night when I was fourteen. I had been flipping through a *Life* magazine and saw a photo of Hedy Lamarr. It awakened my sequin gene. What can I say? She went apeshit and called me a creepy capon and said that I was bunny soft which caused me to barricade myself upstairs in my room where for a whole week I did nothing but dolefully listen to Ravel's 'Pavanne for a Dead Princess' over and over again. So lovely, so sad. Who was it that said a man never forgives the woman who forces him to lie to her? I had a 'malicious mischief' back in Delaware in 1966—can you see *me* in Delaware?—and for months with her eyes tungsten in fury Mother, let's say, was not exactly ready to talk to me, was not *available*, you see, blah, blah, blah. It was very Maria Callas and all. I'm used to this, doctor," he mocked, squeezing his hands and shape-changing to a psychiatric patient exaggeratedly leaning on Eyestones's shoulder for a moment. "I got picked on for liking to watch my mother iron clothes. Girls called me 'Woim' at dancing class, which I loathed.

I was sent to reform school in the fourth grade for allegedly attacking a teacher, a hysteric Mrs. Roller, when all I did in class was scream out, 'Why *don't* you?' when she threatened to jump out of a high window and then I only tried to protect myself when in a suddenly red-meat-faced way, half nuts, she dug her nails into my neck!"

Chasuble took a donut. "I should pity my family and say a daily prayer for their souls, but I don't. In their shallowness, if you really want to be truthful, they actually *remind* me of Laura Warholic. Look," said Chasuble, lowering his voice, "it's none of my business," and he kept circumspectly turning around to reassure himself that they were alone, "but I mention seeing her only because that night, remember Curbstepper? Gimpie? Limpie? Or whomever he is when he's at home? Not that black guy, Chester the Molester or whatever his name is, the one with the hat. No, I'm talking about that crippled weird guy, remember, who used to walk boldly right up to the *Quink* offices checking up on your friend Laura? Well, that very guy—and you don't forget stuff like this—actually came creeping into the theater on the night in question and began peering from row to row looking for her! This is *not* an attractive man, Eugene. Good God, I mean, to look up in a dark neighborhood theater only to see one of the knights of the living dead with his head on backwards suddenly hobbling down the aisle like Igor the Castle Idiot dragging his pole and squinting from seat to seat to seat? I almost delivered sextuplets. El Creepo!" said Chasuble, with raised claws. "And, God, is she . . . what's the word I want here? A rube! So pizzeria-hyperchic. Skinny as a whippet. She hasn't a hint of room presence. As to my guess about her personal habits, do not even. And who does she look like? Exactly. *Exactly!* I mean, we're talking ditzoidal Barbara Stanwyck here in *The Bride Walks Out!* Twins to a T! Separated at birth! Shout 'Snap'! I recall seeing her once last year at the office in a shirt wearing what I would describe as Frida Kahlo colors and thought *not on your tintype!* But at the movies she had on this plum or damson what-have-you, a bum-freezer covering nothing. Not that there was that much to see. Hello?" he said holding up a flat questioning hand and made an audible shiver. "And as I say who was it let a Japanese teppan chef loose on her hair? I don't get it. I sleep in a hairnet myself. My hair blow-dries softer in the morning. Oh hell, Eyestones, I realize I look like old silent-star John Bunny. But I'm clean. I am clean, there's that. I will not touch a detergent shampoo. Speaking of which, I love your hair." Came a pause. "Silence?" asked Chasuble,

stepping back. He was easily wounded.

"I'm sorry. I don't like flattery. You understand," said Eyestones who was always on guard against being gratified by appreciation from any quarter. "I was brought up to decline compliments." He was skeptical of praise.

"I understand, I do. I recall a party in Revere when the hosts produced a violin and, wanting to please them, I gather, who were prodding you, you played 'Wild Horses.' Remember? The Rolling Stones. I was so moved I came undone and began to weep. Uncontrolled tears. Well, the opening alone is so, so, so, you know, indescribably—what? I'm beginning to fill up right now. Anyway, I complimented you, and, I gotta say, you wouldn't have it."

"That's what I mean."

"Then there was that wonderful evening last fall after seeing you at a concert at Symphony Hall featuring Prokofiev's *Second Violin Concert in E Major*—"

"*G Major*."

"—*G Major* when you took the time to explain for me and others all those soaring passages of unearthly melody with such clarity I, I, I—"

"Yes, yes. It was nothing."

"Oh well," replied Chasuble, "See? I'm the opposite, I suppose because I have always been needy ever since I was two and wore a tutu and essentially lack an interior life, which of course is why I am an overstated dresser. Tropical deco, how'dya do! Don't misunderstand me, life is the pits, but I gotta say fussiness cheers me up. When—"

He froze for a moment. Chasuble waited until Mr. Fattomale, averting that face like a rattoon, walked by in order confidently to continue. He hissed like an elevator, "I'm sorry but I do not trust that man. Not. On. Your. Nelly. Anyway, back to movie night. I was telling you about Curbstepper. Now listen, I have been everywhere from Bangkok to Baltimore to Bognor Regis, up hill and down yonder, from Valentine Alley to the Fruited Plain, and, as Waylan Flowers and Madame used to say, have done everything twice and hated it both times! But my experience that night gave me the fantods. Are you with me? And on his peregrinations through the dark theater that night Curbstepper had a look on his face that I can only describe as, um, um, um, well, let us just charitably say goosebumpily *unhinged*—something along the lines of sweaty, urgent, murderous Jack Palance at the end of *Sudden Fear*,

try. By the way, did you know that Joan Crawford, she of the boiled-egg eyes, was in real life, quotation marks here, actually covered with a sea of freckles from head to toe?" He laughed. "Ouch! I could tell you more about the life and loves of Lucille LeSeuer, but I'm talking too much as it is and you want me to get to the point. The cripple. The cripple was quite angry and looking for something or someone. Scary, huh? As the goalies in hockey say, it's not what you stop, it's what you let in. He was hatchet-faced in fury, gimp as a lanyard. He must have been following them."

"Them?"

"Well . . . yes."

"Who else?"

"Oops."

So after I left, Laura had gone out with someone else, Eugene realized. He speculated about her early years, in part because the eroticism of her hurt and the need that a carnal, even predatory, appetite imparted to it were, he suspected, a product of them. What is the best way to be sad? he asked himself. To learn something. It was true. *I am* so *not the kind of person who sugarcoats*, he heard Laura coldly remark in his memory. No, she was merely a hypocrite. It wasn't jealousy that sobered him as much as the fact of her deceit, her double bookkeeping, and the concomitant worry, at least to him, that she was hell-bent for destruction. *Our acts she belied / Says the bell of Saint Bride*, he thought.

"Oh God, do you care?" Chasuble solicitously asked, putting a soft hand in Eyestones's wrist but thinking *You must be out of your Chinese mind!* Did he care? Eyestones asked himself. Was it not the very way he had designed his life, to look at the world from a distance and on his own terms? Did he not care? Did he know or didn't he? He took a long considered look at Eyestones. "May I ask, um, is this a *thing* for you? Like Lon Chaney madly cutting off his arms in Tod Browning's *The Unknown* to prove his love for Joan Crawford, thinking that this sacrifice will actually induce her to marry him?"

"Go ahead," said Eyestones. "Continue."

"About?"

"About the 'oops' part."

Chasuble looked doubtful.

"You promise?"

"Please."

"I just had a chance not to *say* that," said Chasuble, remorsefully.

"I'm sorry."

"No, it doesn't matter. It is all the same to me."

Chasuble hesitated. "Well, there *was* a guy sitting with her, Eyestones. Long, frizzy, whitish hair. Odd pop-eyes. Faggy lips. Puppy chin. Mid-range interesting. In his forties or so. Personality of porch furniture. Face of a round stale cookie. Somewhat like that awful Gnorm with his moon-face and lemon-tip chin. Not arm-candy or eye-candy, trust me. Nothing *like* arm-candy. I'd put him in the self-indulgent baby category, OK? Not quite as round as None of the Above's, although in a general way he had the same kind of suck-fisted muttiness, if you get me. Spineless as a chocolate éclair. Virile?" He negatively shook his head. "Fat chance, open and end parentheses. Not gonna happen. There's a certain kind of man I like; there's a certain kind that I don't like. Faces are my bag. Please, don't tell me about faces, OK? I used to go to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art when I was living in Long Beach and would stand for entire *hours* with what I can only call worship in front of Sir Thomas Lawrence's perfectly exquisite *Portrait of Arthur Atherley as an Etonian*, date 1790, which as far as I am concerned, Eyestones, is mine—mine *alone*, OK? Exclusively. I'm sorry, but nobody can be in the same room with me watching it. I have to make distinctions like this. As I told you, I'm fussy and neat. I'm a Virgo, remember. Anyway, that guy with your friend Laura was a bit fouffy-looking, if you want the real truth, but of course," he offered with a papillonaceous flutter of his hand, "I tend to think that of everybody, even the ratty little hoydens I used to pick up on 53rd and Third when I was living in Manhattan who had very small endowments in the way of *grazia* or *leggiadria*. So my view of Mr. Mystery has nothing to do with what André Gide called '*la chose*' is all I want to add. But what else? Well, he had a wedding ring on his hand, I remember, because I always look. Other than that, he looked just like any other kid with a replaceable head, as in Richard Hell and the Voidoids. And the little darling was wearing Ray-Ban Predators in the lobby right up until the time they opened the doors, which gives you some frowning kind of idea about his form of self-drama. I swear, there are more aren't-I-spiffy leather-pant-wearing, long-haired Led Zeppelin look-alikes in the purlieus of Greater Boston than anywhere else in the country. I dropped my camera, of course. He's got nothing there either—a total zero in the package department. Shades, in any case, do not make a movie star. No, Laura's friend there was no Gary Cooper in the looks

department. Oh, that's right, I forgot, you dislike Coop because—what was it?—you read somewhere that he was an ignoramus, right? I agree. An airhead, to be sure. Still, he played a professor in *Ball of Fire*1941." Chasuble giggled. "Talking about etymologies and split infinitives and quoting William Blake and claiming he could, what, 'read fluently at the age of two.' What a hoot. Anyway, I got his measurement, Laura's friend, I mean. Laura of course just shined me on, never looked at me, and who cares, but then how could and why would she notice when she was all over him like remoulade on a platter of cold seafood. She was almost wet! An acute phase is a period of time during which someone suicidal is in danger of hurting herself. It was that kind of needful, my friend. How would I describe it, you ask? Did you ever hear Lou Rawls, he of the gold neck-chains, pronounce the word *loooove* in any of those cheesy songs of his from the full-sideburns-and-bellbottom-trousers-and-yellow-refrigerator-days of the dear 1970s? '*Lady loooove*,'" fat Chasuble mooed. "'*You are the something something of my turn-arounds, something of my ups and downs. My lady looooooove!*' Picture that kind of schmalz and you've got it, all right? Making eyes at him, OK? Puttin' spots on dominoes, as they say. Me, I said to myself while watching the two of them—it was embarrassing—why don't you both get a room? As I say she never looked at me, although at one point during the intermission when she was disembarking from the ladies' room and aiming in my direction I immediately thought: 'Get back in there, you mock turtle!' as Cary Grant tells Roz Russell in *His Girl Friday*. Anyway, are you asking me was it one of those love teams like Vilma Banky and Rod La Rocque? F. X. Bushman and Beverly Bayne? Alan Ladd and Veronica Peekaboo? Not even close, E^2. But she is a doozie, no? Isn't a trick that keeps on working a technique?"

"Did you say 'dropped your camera'?"

"You know, checked below the waist."

"That's a new one."

"Gay slang."

At that moment, Ann Marie Tubb walked by with that big lumbering gait of hers and went banging into her office. Chasuble closed his eyes. "Did you see the backyard on that one? Talk about a boxful of Iowa hams. Wagons roll! She looks like Blanche Yurka in *The Furies*. You want to know if they weigh themselves on livestock scales! Tent pants! Size 60! When those two get together it's Operation Camel Yelp! Aging always makes a woman mean, or am I wrong? You can count

the dendrochronological rings around the neck of that one, which I gotta say is scary." The Krauthammer meanwhile came bonking back downstairs on what seemed like lumberjack's shoes and before stepping into Ann Marie Tubb's office, having caught Chasuble's stare, stopped dead in her tracks and boldly asked, "Gotta problem, butter face?"

"Who's the manatee?" asked Chasuble of Eyestones with a questioning smirk.

"Cram it."

"Off to the food court?"

"Go piss up a rope," snapped The Krauthammer.

"I love the fabric you're wearing," said Chasuble, flicking his fingers and turning his back on her. "You were lucky to find so *much* of it." He snorted. "What have you been eating, *squeeze cheese*?"

"Sit on this!"

"Mancow."

"Go toot the pink oboe."

"Chlamydia victim!"

"Meat whistle."

"Crone."

"If you were soup, you'd be Cream of Faggot," said The Krauthammer and slammed the door.

"Audrey Totter in *Tension*! Audrey Totter in *Tension*! Audrey Totter in *Tension*! The worst bitch ever!" cried Chasuble. "I can't bear them! Especially Overalls there whose avoirdupois varies somewhat along the lines of an overseas cargo container. Do you know what's *in* a Monte Cristo sandwich? French toast, ham-and-cheese coated with eggs, deep-fried, and served with maple syrup! That's only a *snack* for them. Just starters. I saw that one at our Hallowe'en masquerade party last fall with a shoe on her head—what, going as chewing gum? It's not them being gay, of course. I have more than one hand on the maypole myself, which is no news, but that one is cruel." He side-whispered to Eyestones, "A few months ago she left a really nasty note on my office door. What fucking claws! But I mean look at her. Manolo Blahnik says that a sandal without a pedicure is a visual sin. How about a federal *crime*, thank you! I have never heard women make so much noise in all my life. Someone should one day film those two shitbirds for the Provincetown Film Festival: *Two Buttered Buns,* starring not necessarily in alphabetical order Lois Rung, Ann Chovey, Mahatma Coat, Luke Out-

adawindow, Ivan Inkling, Amanda Reckonwith, Taka Knapp, Erasmus B. Dragon, Justin Tune, with a cameo by Woody Woodpecker, and of course pert Shirley ThethingsthatIask—hair by Sidney Guilaroff, art director Van Nest Polglase—on loan from Frankie Avalon's hit song 'Venus.'" R. Bangs Chasuble sighed. "When I was growing up, way back during the Punic Wars, the quintessence of breeding in a lady was a quiet footstep. But did you hear that bovine thunderthud going up and down the stairs just now—a thunderous ox-tread—of Hugin and Munin, Phorcy and Ceto, Baffy and Cleek? And those bangs over her face! Roundness of head—*pace* Claudette Colbert—abhors bangs. What the fuck, is it pumpkin season?"

"She left you a nasty note?"

He nodded. "Implying I was a eunuch."

"Really?"

"And signed it: *In the name of Jehovah, I will cut them off!* Psalm 118: 10."

"I am what I am, Eugene. What can I say? I can only be me. I'm strange. I insist on having an unlisted outgoing telephone wherever I go. Like Liberace, I don't cook, but unlike him I do read. I love the fake as long as it looks real. I love feathers, rhinestones, bugle beads. I crave movies to the point of need. I have to go to a museum once a week. I get aroused simply walking by that glorious statue of handsome Alexander Hamilton—what a package!—in front of the U.S. Treasury Building in Washington, D.C. I have a distinct *beguine* for things Japanese. I am Fräulein Else. I admit it, I am. I am plump and deep-seated like the sofas and chairs to which indigenous decorator Billy Baldwin—are you aware that he personally abhorred the term 'interior decorator'?—was partial. Did you know, by the way, that he regarded real books as a capital decorative element in a room? That means so much to me. 'I am everything my scrapbook says I am,' as Andy Warhol said of himself," added Chasuble, theatrically covering his brow. "May I admit personally to a compulsive need for color without worrying that you think I hide in it? I do not, I am only beautifully aspiring in doing so to what is more than *me!* It's a 'queer' thing. Color rectifies a wrong in us, doesn't it? I need it, is all I know. Maybe I stayed at the America Hotel in Miami Beach so long that, like John Sex, I've been trying to wear the lobby ever since! I expressly cross-dressed in junior high school to look like Garbo, except that, wouldn't you know it, I ended up looking like Edna May Oliver, who was born in Boston

by the way, Eugene, did you know that? I chalk up my transvestial urges to Mother of course, who rather madly insisted that I sleep with her in her bed until I was fifteen and who breast-fed me until I was four, when every night would be theatricalized by the same exchange, as she'd call out, 'Darling want to come to bed?' and I'd ask, 'What time is it?' whereupon she'd memorably coo in full farture under the peek-a-boo in a lilting twee voice, 'What does Mr. Clock say?' And I'd trundle in. Now there's a Kodak moment. No wonder I need a craniosacral therapist, Eyestones. Thanks, Mommy Dearest. The telephone you don't hear is me not calling, and the person not answering it is Mother expecting it to ring."

He refused a proffered donut.

"I can't seem to shut up."

"Not at all."

"Chronic anxiety plagued me from youth. I ballooned at the age of nine. 'I can't eat when I'm in the depths of despair,'" he said, "like Anne of Green Gables. I swear to God I feel as old as a Trilobite, Eugene, and can still go through scads of two-ply tissue like nothing with the blue weepies." Chasuble gloomed, "Everywhere I have been I've found an element of *tristesse*. 'Out of everywhere into nowhere. Is it a poem or is it a wish?' as Olivia DeHavilland says in *This Our Life*. She has all the good lines in the movie. Bette Davis as bitchy Stanley Timberlake is too busy playing cobra lady doing a vamping routine and screaming up the phone bill to wax poetic, right, kids? I mean, she kim-kongas every male in sight and treats her little wendy of a sister like shmatta. I suppose if I had learned something from her I would not have become the push-button I am. Pass me my vogues!"

Eyestones patiently listened to Chasuble who talked on and on like Tintoretto painted, to attract attention, often at the expense of coherence. There was nonetheless a kind of percipience the fellow had, and Eyestones would never fail to remember Chasuble's remark one of the few times they had gone to lunch together, when he had looked up and exclaimed, "I see that you're a hypochondriac," to which, when asked why he said that, he replied between sucks of a long barbecue rib, "Because everything you eat is good for you."

"I always wear long white Orlon cardigans for my coffee and Danish in the morning and on Sunday on my veranda, which has fabric walls in aster colors, lavender, pink, and purple," continued Chasuble. "They were originally birch, the whore of hardwoods, until I rehabbed

the thing for $17,000, how do you do. I keep vases of New Zealand flax that smells like honey, and I don't think it's asking too much if I love to get into a Jacuzzi, light candles, put a mint mask on, and breathe deeply with a few lovely plants around while just lying there like a lox, do you? I hate coleus, square stems, ugh, which is frankly surprising, since variegated things, but mostly with a more, oh I don't know, royal pattern, usually light me up. I stay in, I cannot stand fresh air, I age ten years in a high wind, although Mother was, you know, God bless her little heart, famously moisture-loving, sun-worshipping, and loamy, but, as I say, it was Mother whom I blame for my overelaborate *modus vivendi*, if you will, since she has all her life been the type—am I talking too much?—who did extremo things like ordering to Scotland for exclusive tins of shortbread, going so far as to send off, not only to friends but to acquaintances, linen stationery actually dried by moonlight in Madagascar, as Bunny Mellon did, and growing rare Franklinia trees at the back of the property, courtesy of hubbie number three. We had money, but look at me, could you possibly find a more flagrant refutatory example of the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice* by Miss Jane Austen, still my favorite author? 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife'? I am different. But in all seriousness, by that much? How about you? Do you use bay rum? Take suppositories? Rub vanilla cream on your feet? Do you—"

Came a howl.

It was Little Bob Merkle, shouting to Chasuble from upstairs that he had a telephone call. "Take a messssssage," yelled Chasuble, giving extra sibilance to the word. "There's another one, the cheap bastard, IRS-challenged, and when it comes to money tight as a bull's arse in fly-time. Talk about paleness of face? And that icky hair? Remember overmashed potatoes and the look of cheap, white, soiled satin to it? Blecch! Have you noticed how he always walks around with his head down scoping out the ground for dropped change?" He leaned forward to whisper. "I call him Rustam, the Missing Father."

"The missing father?

"You heard me."

"Meaning?"

"Didn't you know?" asked Chasuble, popping his eyes. He paused to look behind him for safety, then turned back. "You don't know?"

"Tell me."

"He's Larry Clucker's father."

"*What?*" Eyestones gasped.

"That's what I said. Larry Clucker's supposedly his son." Chasuble wagged his fingers. "Just when you think you've seen it all, you haven't, right? I have theories. There is no such thing as a completed telephone call, nor," he tapped his nose sagaciously, "the transmission of sperm not open to the wetness, winds, weather, and *whims* of voyaging. Parentage is as cheap and chancy as roulette. Can you fathom it?"

"Good grief."

"The shock du jour."

"I daresay I shouldn't be shocked. They always did avoid each other, Little Bob Merkle and Larry Clucker."

"No, I mean about your friend, Laura."

"Oh, it doesn't matter. You like movies: remember Dana Andrews as MacPherson saying in her namesake movie, *Laura*, 'Dames are always pulling a switch on you'? Dames. Dudes. So why not fathers?" asked Eugene, sitting down on one of the stairs to catch his breath, however. "By the way, may I ask without offense why you always flick your fingers up and down? I don't mean to pry. Is it something like an exercise?"

"Marilyn Monroe—you who adore her don't *know* this?—was taught this trick making *The Prince and the Showgirl* as a 'tension reliever' by one or another of the loathsome members of the Strasbergs. You know, that family of remoras in black clothes who exploited her for fast cash? I do it for the very same reason I'm sure poor Marilyn did: to keep from strangling people."

Chasuble finished his cup of coffee. "So there you have your movie gossip for the day, and if she hurts you she should be sentenced to a hundred years in Allenwood, Pennsylvania, where all the spies go to do time. What a couple! I could prophesy the outcome for you, if you'd like. Magnolia Hawkes and Gaylord Ravenel are not going to be the hit of the river."

"I don't know."

"Be careful, friend."

"No problem."

"One can always imagine a better person than the one we can remember. Think about that."

"I will."

"I'm off to Blockbusters now to rent some old Susan Hayward

movies."

"Sounds perfect."

"Love ya, mean it, gotta go."

*

Everybody seemed to be going. Laura, whom Eugene saw only randomly now and usually in the street in a hurry—she who had greenish rinse in her hair and was now wearing trousers seemed even more bowlegged—continued going to the movies by herself, matinees mostly, Mecca for the lonely and unemployed, now that she was on government assistance, only another "gimme girl" with her hand out. The cinema in a very real sense was church for her, a secular temple, the field where reality was not regarded as essential and the dark left her alone with her Cubist reveries. Sitting alone in the dark helped her immensely. She had developed a compulsive interest in noir films and brought a high seriousness to that genre that bordered on a religious vigil. She would slouch alone in her row like a mad nun, her piragua-sized feet up, watching, almost desperate to discern deepness. She patronized only those small box-sized art cinemas one sees everywhere in Cambridge, where audiences, small and fussy and bespectacled, particularly favored foreign films in black-and-white with subtitles that, although generally poison to commercial patrons, invariably imparted an edifying psychic lift to those passionate xenophiles, obsequious Europrats, and dedicated nihilo-aesthetes who fall hook, line, and sinker for any film that is not only endless, grainy, incomprehensible, and ends with "Finis" and not "The End"—one especially that denies the possibility of any objective truth, disproves the existence of absolutes, and derides anything that is wholly true or false, while demolishing as fake any attitude not born of indifference and imperturbability. It was a mood that permeated the atmosphere around Harvard University like a whiff of its red air and cold water and wet elms.

Only once in all the time that Eyestones knew Laura did he ever see her respond sentimentally, not to an entire movie, never the whole of a warm story—that never happened, not to someone so needfully aligned to the hipness of "low crotch" events like rock concerts, biker rides, or club bashes—but it did manage to happen once. She had true compassionate tears in her eyes only once, he recalled, when, after they had first met, she had badgered him to play something on his

violin, and he had played the Air from Bach's Orchestral Suite no. 3 in D Major. Then, sadly, lest she seem sentimental, she quickly turned away. But the other time was different. It took place when watching the English movie musical *Scrooge* at a local theater into which as if for refuge she had run—fled, really—after one of Warholic's lawyers had telephoned her with threats of litigation and dire warnings that he was on his way over to serve papers at her flat. Since Laura had left a note for him, Eyestones had met her inside the cinema, and there in a lovely snowy Christmas-card scene at one point in the movie where a young Scrooge, courting lovely Isabel on a beautiful day, takes her winter riding in a trap, with all the horses handsomely trotting, his fiancée sweetly sings,

> They say happiness is the folly of fools.
> Pity poor me, one of the fools;
> Happiness is smiling upon me,
> Walking my way, sharing my day.
> Happiness is whatever you want it to be.

Suddenly Laura began to weep, sobbing softly with her head hung low, wiping her eyes, clutching a handkerchief in her hand, sorrowing as if she were feeling the last pain of the world. He would never forget she was wearing a horrible bluejay-blue shirt with boxed cuffs. Her soft sobs, her shirt, her reddening nose. It was an unprepared-for loopiness that both saddened him and endeared her to him. Wasn't her unpredictable self reason enough to care, to feel, for her? It is the devil who follows a straight line, according to the Vietnamese—Mutrux with his quiddities—which is why so many houses in Asia are always curved.

> They say happiness is a thing you can't see,
> A thing you can't touch. I disagree.
> Happiness is standing beside me.
> I can see him. He can see me.
> Happiness is whatever you want it to be.

Laura bought that soundtrack album. She bought CDs and cassettes. She still bought lots of discount music, going to record shops, rummaging through album bins, and buying used posters and secondhand cassettes. She also began buying books and magazines on film,

especially *Filmforum*, which in clubs she liked to be seen with and noticed reading, carrying it around like a Pashtun his Koran. Was it her alternative to her failed painting career, listening to music and seeing movies? Who could know? She liked films with subtitles, the cachet of foreign intellection, but she would of course agree to—deign to—see American movies once in a while. Eugene took her grudgingly to see the Metro masterpiece *Sherlock, Jr.* with Buster Keaton, although the year 1924 for her might just as well have been 1624, along with several movies with beautiful Louise Brooks like *Pandora's Box* and *Diary of a Lost Girl* and *Love 'Em and Leave 'Em*. During the course of their relationship, finally, Eugene deftly managed to avoid, by never attending with her a showing of the movie, in the off-chance of the superstitious inevitability of the proverb coming true that says you will marry the person you see *Casablanca* with. Laura actually had some gifts of mimicry, holding up her index finger, for example, and with a raspy voice imitating Danny in *The Shining* ("Thank you, Mrs. Torrance") or, mimicking Vivian Blaine as Adelaide with her dripping nose, singing from *Guys and Dolls* ("A poirson can develop the grippe") or impersonating the scolding Juliette Lewis in *Natural Born Killers* ("Bad, bad, bad, bad!"). He in turn did a broad parody of Al Jolson, a gay imitation of Al Stewart singing "The Year of the Cat," and with lip-fizzes, mouth-pops, tongue-snaps, and throat-clucks a simulation of a man opening a bottle of wine and then proceeding to drink it. Laura invariably spoke about rock stars and pop singers and various punk celebrities as if they were all personal acquaintances, needing them all as centers for cultural exchange, names interspersed in her conversation of whatever sort like milkweed in cornfields. She always went on at length with a high-school but endearing foolishness that was formerly reserved only for rock fingerheads about favorite actors of hers like Marlon Brando, Antonio Banderas, Ralph Fiennes, Hugh Grant, et al. while of course in discussing movies always dropping serious names like Godard, Fassbinder, and Luis Buñuel for a bit of self-aggrandizement, so much more profound in her pantheon of admiration than Shifty and Howie and Mike, more recent acquaintances—all Spandex and big hair and nose-rings, no doubt—that noisily entered and oafishly sat down as guests in her less than stellar nonversation, presumably by way of her various record shop divagations and which for the dim centripetalism of her selfish vanity she never noticed he heard.

XXXIX
Dead Champagne

Strange days followed. There were signs in Laura's restlessness of an affective indifference to him, one for all its casualness that depended for the most part on her need for him to notice. They bumped into each other in Central Square one day in mid-November and she wanted to take a drive up to New Hampshire, so they went and headed up along the Kancamagus Highway trying to see colorful foliage. Eugene loved the smell of autumn, the bright mornings, the loamy afternoons of sunshine, the dusty beauty at dusk of an Andrew Wyeth landscape. It was that period, late in the year, when he never felt he had to apologize to anyone for disappearing in the afternoon and staying in at night, reading, alone. Trees were mostly branches now and no longer showing much in the way of color. They ended up going to Mount Washington. They stood on the pavilion of the small lodge at the base of the mountain in the midst of others and unenthusiastically watched the creaking cog railway, filled with black coal, rattling up the tracks to the summit. The multivarious light playing on the mountain was a revelation of what we all consist of, he thought, shadows and colors, barrenness and fertility, dead empty spots, stone, moss, dents, old declivities, watercourses. A bird flapped into the forest. "Look, an eagle. Or is it a woodpecker?" inquired Laura. "Maybe a magpie."

"There are no magpies in New England," said Eugene. He laughed. Laura, however, took the right corner of her lower lip with an up-

per tooth, converting a semblance of gracious reflection into a cagey smirk.

"I know one."

"Me?" he asked.

"No," she said and smiled knowingly, "someone else. "

"Who?"

"Never mind, Sugar Shorts."

Was she trying to tell him something? He knew it was a man only because he understood her coyness. It was the kind of bluntness in a woman that falls just short of bullying, the pointed remark offered in a modified and denatured way. To a bully it feels better to punish someone than to finesse them. She would say no more, tell him nothing. In his relations with her, he was less subtle about her faults, mainly the abrasiveness of competitive enmity. Rudeness to other women. Envy of the rich. Contempt of the poor. "Gimme french fries," she would order with never a please or thank you. It was unbearable to him. "'He who oppresses the poor has contempt for God.' Proverbs 14:31," Eugene would say, which infuriated her.

They looked for a grassy knoll. They had brought a bottle of champagne, which he opened. It tasted flat and uninteresting. "Dead," he sadly said. They went back to the pavilion and had ice-cream cones. Turning to her, he asked if she wanted to try the railway. She did not answer. She appeared preoccupied and simply nipped her cone, taking on that desperate slightly mad, *locked*, faraway stare one often sees on a deeply thirsty person gulping from a vessel of water. Her cryptic remarks he decided to leave locked in her own mystery. Although they had intended to stay the weekend—she was the mistress of subversive accommodation—Laura complained as they walked around the pavilion, her lazy head rolling like a gimbal lantern, that she had an ice-cream headache and wanted to leave. They said little on the ride up to New Hampshire or back and returned on a silent drive down a succession of lonesome highways under a beaver moon.

As she had no job and was only hanging around, he sensed a black depression coming. He had the impression she was going back to San Francisco.

They walked down to the Charles at his bidding the very next day. Soft gongs of clouds tumbled across the sky. Laura used to jog along the banks of the river in her more energetic days, her nose perched like a weathervane, bumless in shiny green shorts, carrying a tiny radio

in her right hand, those long thin pumping legs looking like a wacky spinning, out-of-sync windmill. A Jew crossing the Tigris on a goatbag looked more graceful than Laura when she jogged. Had she lost her interest in jogging when she started smoking pot? He once heard Jamm the Wesort pitching her the line, "I gots some *goood* shit for you, baby. Plump buds, no street shake!" It was a blustery Saturday afternoon. All the sycamores, stripped, seemed in their slender patched flavescent bodies awkward and slightly naked. Earlier in the day, Eugene had gone in to pay a bill for his property taxes, and sitting down to have chowder and talk on a low brick wall in Government Center he tried to bring her out. There was now barely a slant of late-afternoon copper sun. Some chickadees were in a puddle nearby: *Pee-paw, pee-paw*. They seemed so frail. Eyestones wondered about Laura's own care. He stopped for a moment. She asked him what the matter was. They were standing in front of a white gas station on Memorial Drive that he called Saint Exxon or Our Lady of Lubrication when in a grave mood he turned to Laura.

"May I say something?"

"Go ahead."

"You won't be upset? You need—"

"I know, I know, I need to see a therapist," Laura quickly interrupted, regarding him with smugly shut eyes, hugging herself against the chill.

"I was going to say you need something that will make you feel better about yourself. A job would give you some income. Raise your self-esteem. Now I think I know where you can get one. For the holidays." They were standing on the Weeks Bridge in the cold wind. Failure is an attitude, he realized. "There is no such thing as a fair wind for the sailor who does not know to which port he is bound," he said. "You don't fail until you give up trying." He heard his own clichés and realized that badgering her was counterproductive, the way an automobile impatiently nosing out of a side street forces oncoming traffic to slow down for it and so in the very act sabotages itself and willfully prevents any attempt at making haste.

"Your pitch, is it part of the crap you wrote in *Quink* that woman is primary because she is closer to the plant?"

"No."

"Stitch it on a pillow."

"Don't you need money?"

"*There's* a bulletin."

He was trying to be helpful. "Look at Wing. She seems industrious and focused." But he saw only *daggers, daggers, daggers*.

He wanted to save her from the logic of her own history. To him, since her ideas seemed to be the contents rather than the objects of sensation, he wondered if she was looking for justification in finding a sensible quality that could not conceivably exist unsensed. She had inattention blindness. No moral congruity. It was not merely no work. It was no wishes, no width, no warmth. By some weird sort of parallactic displacement, he continued to feel as he had in that roach motel in Newark, guiltily, that Laura Warholic was not better or had not improved or remained the same simply because he didn't care enough. The rich man who eats with a stick does not know that the poor man who eats with his fingers is burnt! Who was it claimed only heathens were sinners or Romans or the luckless few crushed by a falling tower in Siloam? We need all repent. He thought,

O eternal everywhere,
O eternal nowhere,
O eternal in vain.

"I want to help," he offered, as woefully tired of an insistence within him to come to her aid, however, as he was of the struggle against all the chaos. Who was it said that order is the light of reason but disorder is the delight of reason, and didn't that apply to them?

Laura partially smiled, two parts of the brain vying for the same face—a petulant impromptu.

"But you're so normal, right? Always straightening mirrors and chairs. Quacking on about Procter & Gamble like some, some . . . some woodpecker! Collecting Pad Thai recipes and eating kimchee and all that oriental slop that makes you shit sparks! All your records neatly filed! Grokking crows! Singing Italian songs! Studying the architecture of bird nests up in the trees we pass! Playing barn music on your fiddle! Predicting that one day people will look back at zookeepers as criminals! Writing about sex for a living? Hating democracy, as you once angrily said but meant it, because it reminded you of us? Loving the long dead ghost of a Vietnamese girl who is no more real today than a sock puppet? Raving on about Victorian Cottage architecture! Weeping over Somebody Somebody's *The Planets* concerto? Jonesing

over old time radio? Walking out of a movie because several actors threw matches on an indoor floor?" She sucked blore for a moment, leaned forward, and, rehuffing, continued shouting in the stabbing B-flats with which Isolde curses Tristan. "This is a balanced mind, are you fucking trying to tell me? Never sit anywhere but row six in the theater? Telling stories of the Freak Sisters and Nothingface the Monster and Professor Munch the Man Who Ate His Wife and Divorced His Lunch who is not even as wacky as you are? Always wearing the same jacket! Liking musicals! Good & Plentys! Loving dead actresses like Louise Brooks and Eleanor Powell and Betsy Drake! What about all your nutty theories, that family members are colder than strangers, that we often love people because we do not like them, that the purpose of our posthumous existence is to relive in eternity our life in order to improve it? That's normal? No wonder you like crows! You didn't throw away your *own* talent? Your own dreams? You with your don't-go-breaking-my-heart stories about your mother's sacrifices for you, crapola about buying you your first instrument, 'Mr Practice' or 'Mr. Cactus' or 'Mr. Tactics,' and all that bullshit you told me about the violin shuddering like an afflicted heart? You're not a fucking energy vampire with no end of precepts about how to live? You don't look at yourself in the mirror and see a failure there, too, mocking your own aspirations that were so high and noble? Shelving your ability? Ignoring your own hopes? Abridging your own goals? You think that's right? Wrong," she vehemed. "Wrong, wrong, wrong!"

"You said you wouldn't get upset."

"And what about *your* friends, Duxbak who's a dwarf, cross-eyed Gnorm, that diseased Mutrux with an ice cube for a heart, Discknickers, a crypto-fascist and electronic freak who loves to see everybody's computer systems go out of date?" She was speaking rapid-fire like an old German MP44 assault rifle, abandoning herself to rhetoric and blue with fury. "What about Chasuble, that overweight butt-pirate with a face like a Kabuki mask coming on with his limp wrist and iron jewelry and plush-toy collection and all that total twatarooney talk and Polk Street horseshit and having 'drinkie-poos,' singing out 'Tribute to Judy' like a fucking poodle! I'll never forget that night when you and I were over at the Copley Plaza with him queening it like a klub kid whore talking fag! 'Eek,'" she mimicked, "'why must they decorate rooms in makeup colors, leaving us all in a powder-fog of pastels? Ooo, tassels! I love tassels! I miss tassels! But now look! There! What

tortured, overblown floral arrangements! And is that unlined taffeta at the windows? Lordy Lou, whatever happened to the real Boston?'" Laura's imitations were the crueler for being the more exact. "He referred to me as 'fish.' Then what about those fat bull-dykes in your office? Those huge muffin-faced pinocchios and stocking-stuffers with multiple ass-fat and bingo wings? Or the sapless blorts and accommodating bed-mats in the place who run after you like a fat kid loves cake? Or that cheese-dick, Little Bob Merkle, the biggest asshole of them all who looks like if you shook him he would pulverize into dust like old paper? Fucking plankton! Vindictive fucks, all of you! Fabrikoids! I wish you knew how it feels."

Many things that Laura said, or objected to, were right. She boldly ploughcut through his personal life, finding fit to condemn every last person that he knew with the exception of a certain green-eyed *ignota* with golden honey-bright hair wearing painter's pants or a striped silk blouse under a short velvet jacket and walking through the Boston Common, leaving Gypsy patrins like dropped leaves as in a fable for him to follow as if on a trail. If it be not now, it will be yet to come, he thought. The readiness is all. On the other hand, Eugene honestly thought that she might be seriously troubled. He had heard of the Ganser Syndrome, where prisoners in jail, say, pretend to be mentally retarded in order to obtain a transfer to a medical facility. The horror of it all, however, was that without realizing it, in spite of their own act, they often *are* mentally ill. A successful suicide victim has almost always first made an idle threat.

Laura's face steepened. "*See?* You don't accept me for what I am," she said in a quavery, astral voice. "You just criticize me. Criticize and berate me. You do, you know. Hold things against me. I've heard some of that shit that Mutrux has been spreading around about me. He told Discknickers. All that stuff when he was living like some snail in his shellbox over in Outer Sunset in San Francisco and trying to ruin my life."

Eyestones, who always thought that Mutrux and Laura were a proper match of negative energies, did not deny it. "But why bring that up now and here?" he asked. She sulked and said nothing. It was the same long misunderstanding they always had. He thought that she hoped for confrontation. Trouble seemed to make her happy, annoyances give cruel delight. There were days when she could show a surge of decency, of hope, but bear market rallies, he knew, are notoriously

sharp and short. He glanced at the unaesthetic tangle of black wires overhead, electric, telephone cable and wondered with disgust why people accepted this raging unsightliness. Why had such chaos in cities for so long been allowed? *Sink them,* he thought. *Put them in the ground.* He felt angry. "Besides, I know what vindictiveness is. I do. I was once acquainted with a prominent but vainglorious and crumbling seventy-eight-year-old New York heiress/socialite who felt rebuffed because I did not oblige her with a kiss on the lips she demanded—*brrr!*—the first hour that I met her. She lived constantly in the violet mists of the past when she wore Gherlain perfume and Reboux hats and Premet gowns and danced the maxixe and the conga in clubs with young men whom she refuses to recognize have been dead and in the grave for more than half a century. She later cut me off from all communication, spread it about that *I* was passive, rudely cancelled three invitations that she had already extended to me, and never telephoned me again, telling friends later, 'I didn't like his hair.' It has always astonished me that overadvantaged people who make so much of good manners can be so blatantly rude and uncivilized. The woman was vulgar, homely, uneducated, credulous, humorless, blame-shifting, dull and thought nothing of shouting to you across rooms like a hod-carrier. So much for *noblesse oblige.*"

"You even love Nook more than me!" she wailed. "A cat, just a god-damn . . . cat!"

"More than you love him, are you saying?"

Laura angrily shook her head and snapped, "What I mean is more than I mean to *you*!"

"I don't."

"You do."

Eugene quoting Walt Whitman just as angrily swiveled around on her and not for a minute felt bad as he recited the poetic lines,

> "They do not sweat and whine about their condition.
> They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins.
> They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
> Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania
> of owning things. . . ."

As they stood there arguing on the bridge, stamping for cold as they bickered, Eyestones remembered out of the blue a sermon he had

heard delivered by a Catholic priest in Saigon when he first went to Vietnam. In the middle of the savage and continuous war all around him, the nightmarish fighting, the insanity of the slaughter, the cruelty year in and year out, the inhuman bombing on our part, the mines, the tiger cages, the destruction, he said if there were a hell he would compare it to Brueghel's *Two Monkeys*. He said it applied to North and South Vietnam, but he saw how it applied to many relationships, people frustrated and angry and blaming each other. The two monkeys chained together in the same cell will not acknowledge or help each other. One can't quite reach the bread; the other can't reach the water. If they worked together, they would both have sustenance, but it is clear that they are headed for, perhaps even desirous of, dehydration and starvation. A sailboat, birds and flight, and other symbols of freedom in the background mock them. It was the story of themselves.

Must it always be that someone who listens hard doesn't see? Nothing was worth this. Should a touch of lucidity in the heart be so rare? The blowing wind forced them to move inside, and they quickly walked over to one of the buildings of the Harvard Business School and stood in a doorway.

"Want to have Thanksgiving dinner with me?"

"Where, at Mrs. Buloni's? Lung's? Ptomaine Heaven? Or what, go to Welfare's and sit in a goddamn booth?"

"At my house."

She shrugged. It was cold. Starlings chortled in the eaves of the building.

He took her shoulder.

He pitied her. It was a vice, he knew it, but convinced and conscious of her isolation and uprootedness he could find no other emotion to serve. Or did that cynical Mutruxism apply that he wanted to see her again in order to find more reasons to get rid of her? To validate his distaste for her? To justify his actions?

There was an awkwardness between them.

"Are you going home for Christmas?"

"Home?"

"To your mother's."

She shook her head. "My grandmother in Syracuse wanted me to visit with her."

"And?"

"I might spend it there," she hesitated, "or . . . I might spend it

here."

"With me?" He paused. "With whom?" He swallowed. "Where? Are you joking? Walking around Malfunction Junction by yourself?" Why had he taken upon himself to worry about someone who was so shy and stubborn and prone to self-deception and to what end? He was not in love with her, he didn't want to sleep with her, he didn't even want to be with her in any formal sense, and yet here he was: worried. Was it that he had been with her for so long that he suddenly felt, could feel, could actually feel, deserted by her indifference? What *was* it in the deep alienation of her being, of her bedlam mind, of her outerborough inexclusivity, of her lost fish-swiveling excuses, of her need, of her chaos, of her contradictions, of her almost immaculate and yet demented disarrangement to which he responded? *They do not sweat and whine. They do not lie awake. Not one is dissatisfied.* They. Them. It. Laura's irritating conditions so often seemed an "it" that it scared him to see how often by way of a pronominal shift he referred to her in his mind as an "it." The clouded sky had gone from cherry-colored and amaranth purple to almost full darkness and the lights of the windows were golden. Were there happy couples in love behind those windows? Truly happy couples? Lovers? Eugene wondered. Engaged souls and willing hearts behind those doors? What was married life like? Would he and Rapunzel ever share that joy?

She stopped dead, flipping her hair. "This is about Micepockets again, right? Bullshit."

Or Varwick, he thought. *Or Jamm the Wesort. Or Discknickers. Or Monterey Jack. Or Sam McGee. Or Garnet Mimms and the Enchanters. If in crime two suspects equal no suspects, what about five? Or ten? Or twenty?*

"Any person

"Total bullshit."

Three, thought Eugene Eyestones, the prime number of myth. He thought if she were seeing anybody, it would be a rock singer, some slacker with tight pants and a guitar probably in a big-hair band, some poor, pimpled, vainglorious foraminifera outside the remit of all normalcy. *We made soup*. He even remembered her salacious wink. *Cream of us.*

"You seem to take chances, don't you? Wander about at night. Micepockets doesn't stalk you when you go out? Hasn't he been in a mental institution?"

Laura charged, "You talk to that smoky who lives behind you, Har-

riet Trombone."

"And your point is?"

"How do *I* know what's going on?"

"That's contemptible."

"I don't go out," she said. She paused and turned a questioning face toward him empty as a circle, detecting a trap. "OK, once in a while. And how the fuck do I know that he's been in a mental institution? You *know* that?" She huffed impatiently and barked, "It's my business anyway. My decision. My life." *My, my, my.* He thought of Snow by bold contrast. *My* is one way of saying "beautiful" in Vietnamese, but it is a word that also means "America." They walked back over the Weeks Bridge and re-crossed Memorial Drive against the heavy traffic always racing by. A small stack of flowers still in a wrapped bunch marked the spot by a telephone pole where obviously someone had been killed in an auto accident. Why, wondered Eyestones, do mourners always leave their public bouquets on display in tightly rolled cornets and never opened? Was it that in some ghoulish or macabre way as if by the nature of leaving a gift they fully expected the deceased themselves to wake and open them?

"You went out last Saturday night," said Eugene. He hung fire a moment. "Didn't you?" She was torn between wondering how he knew or whether he was bluffing. He could detect her assaying eyes and concluded that she had more stripes with different colors than a sardonyx. He judged her lies not only by means of her calculating pauses but also by the way she held her hands, the way a magician, feigning the need to see the volunteer's "thoughts," can discern from the clutch between the penny in her left hand and the nickel in her right. He felt that he could often detect lying by the manner in which a person holds her hands. It was important that she tell him the truth about herself, in any case, if for no other reason than he could now tell her about Rapunzel, although, he wondered, tell her what? Still, he needed the heat to cause the blister, thinking there is no room in the life I've spent with you for the kind of love you expect me to continue showing. Why is it so hard for us to confess our vices? he wondered. Because we are in them? Is it for a waking man to tell his dream? It was horrible in the sense that he had come to *bank* on her dishonesty, in the tradition of Diderot who assumed that information can be made memorable only when it is slightly colored by prejudice. "You don't have to say anything. It's just that you used to be honest with me. You

can tell me, if you want. Being truthful is being free."

"That sounds like a recruiting poster," said Laura.

"I'm on your side. You can tell me the truth."

"About what?"

"Anything."

"Like?"

"Going out."

She whooshed impatiently, rose, and strode across the room defiantly to lean against the wall with one arm. She had the wrists of an assassin.

"Out where?"

"Anywhere." He paused. "I understand the need—"

"*Understand fucking what?*"

"—the need to kill time, I was going to say."

Laura, turned to the window and took an aggrieved breath. "That reminds me of a line from the industrial band Cabaret Voltaire: 'Why kill time when you can kill yourself,' a darkly danceable underground hit."

"Profound."

"I thought you'd like it."

Eyestones smiled, blinking through his thick glasses. They walked to her house.

"Did you know that Cabaret Voltaire was the name of the original organization of the Dadaists?" asked Eugene. "And then the name of their international review, with writings by Tzara, Apollinaire, and Marinetti?"

"Yeah, yeah."

Laura always reminded him, in what always went wrong when what he expected of her was always confounded, of how one of the most common misspelled words, as if to remind us directly of the frailty, is the word *misspelled.*

Was he involved with her or not? We are more involved in those we pity than those we love, he was sure of it, and he knew that she maintained hold over him by way of his pity for her. Those we love exact another involvement. No greater proof exists of one's transmogrification at the beginning of love than the change in—usually, the loss of—personality. For Rapunzel's love he felt he would have died. Where Rapunzel was in her purity and elegance, he thought, pure white like Rigel in the Orion constellation over 900 light years from us

and Sirius, the Dog Star, eight and a half light years, Laura was a black hole. He had no idea what to do for her. He was neither her salvation nor the answer to her mercurial and desperate turpitudes that, this night like so many others, seemed only another part of the corrosive rain washing away their lives. A paradox is, after all, compelling not because the problem is important but because the solution is difficult. Eugene badly wanted her to find her way, simply because, if she did, it seemed to him he would be able to do the same for himself. If a person faces a small irritable fact today, he figured, it can never become with the danger of fatal surprise a bounding panther tomorrow. Do we not go through our lives in stages, the way a tree becomes a table? Axe, adze, joiner, plane, pitsaw. Cuts shear to shape. Shapes determine a platform. A platform becomes a stage. What stage was he in? He only feared he was changing, too. Laura and he were different sides of the same destitution. It was only himself he did not recognize. A despairing person is always the Vicar of Bray.

A gust of wind rocked the doors as she looked up and asked, "Are the Dadaists heavy metal or what?"

Eyestones was a dreamer as dreamers go and as dreamers go, he left. He did not want to go home. He walked back down River Street and went over to Scullers Jazz Club across the river to have a drink and listen to some music at the Doubletree. Restless, he moved on. He did not want to think of Laura anymore. He walked down by the waterside to feel the cold air on his brow and sat on the grass in the dark and started thinking of spatial causality and cloud cycles and concepts of siegecraft. He refused to think of Laura. He tried thinking of exogamy and nonlinearity and Gerard Manley Hopkins and deformity grids and electrotherapeutics and mechanical properties of the cycloid and morphometrics and Wittgenstein and principles of contamination and the influence of diffracted light on perception. His head swam. Nighttime halos. Ghost images. Floaters. Concentric rings. Hard phosphenes. The reflection of the city lights in the water.

Later that night at home Eyestones got a telephone call. It was Mutrux. "Abe's parents, Jim and Judith?" he said. "They won't be down for breakfast."

XL
The Case of the Substitute Face

Dear Eugene,

I guess it's about time I told you, and I don't think you'll be surprised, knowing me, that I have met someone else. He likes me, but I think I may be in love with him. I have to be frank, he's got me really turned around. I'd rather be with him than with you.

Laura, hesitating, sucked the nub of her pen. Her cross-staring eyes, incused with guilt, shifted back and forth. But why should she feel guilty, she asked herself, why always her? She was fed up with her lot in life. She thought for a moment of Eyestones's insistent, hard-to-categorize eccentricities and this other man; torn between both, choosing half and half, she found that ultimately she was getting the benefits of neither and the shortcomings of both. Enmeshments, with no ratifications. Entanglements, with no results. She was going nowhere fast. She saw she would always feel irate. She nervously snatched a maroon scrunchie out of her tangled hair, slipped it heedlessly over her wrist, and continued to write.

~~Jeff~~ J. has been singing in a rock band for twenty years, is poor, probably alcoholic, and works about sixty hours a week in record stores. Worse, I suppose, he is married and though his wife left to study in another city, she visits on occasion. I am convinced he loves me. I've been with him about fifteen times now. He says he loves her and wants to make their marriage work and admits that he's the one responsible for screw-

ing up their relationship. I think that he ~~loves me~~ is trying to encourage me.

She read over the words, her mouth set in a thin, hard line, torn between revenge along with a compulsion to boast and the need for secrecy. The vanity of knowing a secret is one of the chief motives to disclose it. But she could only trust where she could believe.

He likes me and confides in me, but he loves her. Obviously, it's foolish for me to become involved with this person, but I can't help it. My mother spoiled me, and I mostly did whatever I wanted when I grew up. Because of that, I guess I just do whatever I want now and don't bother about the consequences. J. can play several instruments, and he's ~~a~~ the lead singer in ~~The Craven Slucks~~ a band. You may remember how much I liked Ronnie Dawson, that rockabilly singer I saw at Passim's Coffee House? Anyway. As I said, I'm probably not telling you anything you didn't suspect.

"Bullshit," said Laura, throwing the pen aside. "I don't need to tell nobody nothin'." She looked up with a shock of recognition. Then with panic she thought that Eugene probably knew everything already. She thought of all the gossip spread about her in the office and of all the wackpackers there poisoning her life. She thought that *everybody knew everything and they were going to pay!*

XLI
Rain with Violence

Rain was falling all morning over Sipps Chapel. A funeral service was being held for several murders that had only just taken place. It was reported that a few nights previous in a fit of familicide, Abe, the endocrine dwarf and office prat, after a brief lifetime of parental abuse, found he could take it no more and murderously proceeding to spread gasoline on an upper floor of his house, he lit a match—a holocaust!—then went and sat with a shotgun at the foot of the stairs, from which angle, when his parents came bowling down the stairs in fright, he blew them both away with a shotgun—a shotgun, it turned out, that he had taken from Little Bob Merkle's office who had swapped it from a duck-hunter in Maine for several reams of office computer paper that he had stolen. It looked like the ultimate scene in a caper film according to the Boston papers, which with the blackest headlines had broadcast the story all over the front page. He shot their homely dog Holman and every single framed photo and picture in the house. Jim's catheter had burst from a shell; he had a hole in him the size of hubcap, and his wife Judith, the ugly flea from Kankakee, the mean-spirited little harridan, work-stained and sturdy, she of the chapped wrists and hands, whose relationship with her weak husband, by general conjecture, had apparently been as blandly sexless as it had been aesthetically unthinkable, apparently looked like an open meatwich, for when the police arrived, they found her sprawled on the floor, her

legs all awry, with her tongue bitten in half and her merganser eyes looking into nothing. She was upside-down in the bathroom.

Abe had been arrested in the produce aisle of a local Stop & Shop that afternoon, big-headed and jumping and hairy and hateful as a yard gnome. A battery of policeman with guns drawn and aimed at his bulbourethral head where he had been found tossing hundreds of cans of liverwurst into his cart with the speed of the Hamburgler handing sandwiches out of his hat. When the police moved in on him, as if being interrupted, Abe looked up at them with disgust—pop-eyed and diaphoretic—and asked "W-what's your damage?" at which point when they handcuffed him he took one look at the manacles and let out a scream in altissimo C, the C above C above high C: "*Etancercept! Infliximab! Anakinra!*" When Abe was infuriated, it was always as if he were speaking Glagolitsa. Gibbering and stuttering and fully incoherent, he was carted away to a psychiatric ward where he would no doubt spend the rest of his life, being visited by fey Larry Clucker who alone in some transvestitial capacity or other would maintain his keen, if unnatural, interest in the poor misbegotten young typist/murderer from *Quink*.

"Judith *disparu!*" toasted Mutrux, faking a raised glass in his hand.

"Frida Fishpiss!"

"The Duchess of Pleats!"

"The Teapot," said Spalatin, placing a hand on his hip and miming her scolding finger.

"The purple woman with the lavender tongue who said *hic*, who said *hoc*, who said *ha*," said Discknickers, throwing his head back in laughter. "*La Trou de Jaloux!* I must admit, it *is* hard to pity—never mind pray for—someone who not only suffered from canine inflammatory syndrome but who actually frothed at the mouth!"

"I hated Judith," pronounced Mr. Fattomale who, dressed in black as usual, thought nothing of the murders. He pulled himself forward in his pew and with a crocodilean snap of jaw that seemed more menacing for that jutting tooth said to Eyestones, "She was all mouth. There wasn't a day I didn't want to cut off her head and thrust a hairpin *through* her tongue, like Antony's wife Fulvia did to Cicero."

"Listen to Mr. Aceto Balsamico," said Discknickers, who hated Mr. Fattomale. He adjusted the jacket of his sharp suit and smoothed down his tie. "A television reviewer making a classical allusion. Now there's a first, am I right?"

"*Petruchio* Fattomale," said Mutrux, ridiculing him in his pervasively loud voice.

Discknickers reached into his suit for an imaginary gun and assumed a Mafia voice. "A dumb dago in dark delivery doctrine."

"The egg-timer!"

"Half chink."

"Who has a complexion the way concrete spalls."

Mr. Fattomale shrieked, "*Formichini!*"

"Every time you get into a taxi," coldly asked Mr. Fattomale of Discknickers, "do they keep the vacant sign up?" It was more than anything his hated rival's studied drapery that Mr. Fattomale so loathed, the foppish ingratiating Italianate clothes he wore with the ostentation of a pimp or some croupier. And that sleek pride he took in his lipoprotein, triglycerides, monocysteine C-reactive protein levels, and thin body fat. Who did he think he was, some "groovy guy"?

Discknickers considered the groomed fingernails of his extended hand and coolly replied, "I make it a habit never to speak personally to someone who wears cuffed pants to a wedding or a funeral"—he snickered—"or looks worse than that, what is his name, Pogostick? The one with one leg shorter than the other like a Swiss cow? You know who I mean, that spaz who keeps hanging around our office?"

"Curbstepper," said Little Bob Merkle.

"Oh, M-micepockets. Right!" said Spalatin.

"I heard that in the privacy of her web the Teapot used to secretly dress up like a bunny and insisted her husband paint his weenie carrot-orange," said Mutrux.

"What a hideous couple, cold-welded together like two pieces of tin!"

"What a hideous *mother*."

"Kinkola. Right, E^2?"

Eyestones said, "But isn't it characteristic of human beings that prurience exists alongside the pretension to moral seriousness? Claude Frollo, Professor Unrat—the minister in Maugham's *Rain*. Maybe me." The service had not yet begun. Eyestones had come to the chapel, as had the others, because it was only a block away from the office, which had in any case been shut down for the day. It was a closet hell with everyone there together. Compassion is almost never to be found among those who do not know how to manage the secret powers that should permeate the heart.

Most everyone was there. Duxbak sat alone at the far end of a pew with a pair of rosary beads in his hands

Ratnaster, who had just slipped into a pew, snarled, "That shrew wasn't a mother to fat Abe, only a sharp set of teeth who kept that dwarf in her mouth, like a cichlid. Her bum was so tight she had to fart sideways. Who that knew her didn't despise her?" The arm of his mechanical hand ached in the rain. "My counter-question to you," he said to Eyestones, regarding him with that cataract eye, "is why the universe is like it is."

"What are you doing here?" asked Mr. Fattomale.

Everyone turned to stare at Ratnaster.

"I came here to find out if the priest at the altar says when he turns around and extends his arms, 'Now for my next trick.'"

Crows, ravens, rooks, daws, pies, shrikes, goraks, choughs, jays, but we're worse, thought Eyestones, listening to the cawing lack of charity. There is little edible that comes amiss to us. The unborn alone are uncorrupted, thought Eugene. Why get married at all? Why bring children into the world in the first place? Was it possible that celibacy was indeed the highest paradigm? Virginity the highest state? St. Paul so declared. St. Peter left his wife chastely to follow Christ. One of the most famous instances of the married ascetic was Tolstoy, whose opinion was that the highest human being completely inhibits his sexual desires and lives a celibate life. Didn't the great novelist, who believed that in this fallen world everyone lives in a state of jealousy, assure us that if all the passions were destroyed, particularly the strongest of them, physical love, the prophecies would be fulfilled, mankind would soon be united, brought into a unity, and then, with the aim of human existence attained, there would be nothing further to live for? Was there not a rare purity and honor adhibiting to all people who never brought children into the world? If the world were empty as widows, why would that be bad? What can be said of amorousness if it is exhausted by the satisfaction of sensuality? Roman vestals. Shakers. The Cathari. Monks. Nuns. Anchorites. Ascetics. Carthusians. Hermits in their skites. The Russian Skopts who practiced castration, which they considered baptism, and who believed that Adam and Eve were originally sexless and that after the Fall the cursed fruit of the forbidden tree was grafted onto their bodies in the form of genitals. Anybody wishing to join the sect first had to willingly forego sexuality. What about the ancient Essenes? Wasn't it curious that the many adherents

of that sect, unlike the self-serving and hypocritical scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees whom he repudiated were in fact *never* denounced by Christ, who, on the contrary, had true sympathy with their voluntary celibacy? Christ never married—see Matthew 19:12—a state that Saint Paul saw as the highest calling, as compared to the rutting mass of mankind. He never instituted marriage. He never recommended marriage. He never conceived a perfect world with marriage in it. Freedom is the nature of resurrection, a state or condition prepared for us of and for unique joy, not for sad, sour, troubled, noctivagant, and self-repudiating creatures pondering their incapacities and incompetencies. *Single* angels inhabit eternity where the living prevail, not the dead. Christ assured the smug, insolent, overfed, heretical, wealthy, and quibbling Sadducees, "When the dead rise, they will never marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven." What can be said of the nuptial state if Saint Thomas More could assert that it "defileth the priest more than double or treble whoredom"? It is not even a relief from oneself—by dint of sharing, say—but arguably the dilution of it. "If you are afraid of loneliness," wrote Chekhov, "do not marry." It was a dire reflection that Eyestones himself once had when caught in the *granizo*, Andean hail, and 20-degree-below temperatures, he almost froze to death climbing Nevado Quehuar, a 20,000-foot peak in northwest Argentina, thinking he would leave no one behind to suffer and fret for him.

"The universe owes you nothing," said Mr. Fattomale to Eyestones, the anger filling his face raising to even greater prominence the blackheads and hex-socket-like scars in his cheeks. A nitella of veins spread over his nose. "We're all shits. Programmed like TV networks. I'm at fault. He's at fault. You're at fault."

"*God's at fault!*" screamed Ratnaster, pointing at the altar to the clicking of that black mechanical hand. "He's at fault! We're born against our will, die against our will, depend on chance—fate, not free will—to meet someone to love, and at the end are haphazardly snuffed like candles, having to wait with that sword of Damocles hanging over our heads all our lives! If death is at the end of each human act, it is at the end of—*and hideously defines*—every act! No wonder life is so absurd. Turn left, you succeed! Turn right, you fail! Be white, you get the job. Be black, you get canned. What in its networking is not high-handed, arbitrary, and fixed? Were you born rich? You then have it ten times easier. If by chance you happen to be good-looking, doors are opened

to you that are slammed shut to others. *Inequality* is cruelty! Cripples, humpbacks, dwarves, the groping blind, creatures with hairlips, cleft palates, goiters, leukemia, yaws, rickets, you name it: do they not lead lives of intolerable desperation? Weather itself is torture! It rains and thunders on Hawaii, California, and Scotland while Somalia and the Sudan are parched white and the black poor doomed, corroded by melancholy and hunger. Who is there for defunct India, lost and desiccated Haiti, the disenfranchised hordes of China, the drumming poor of Mozambique? God, the Living Stone, His Whiteness, who created this valley of tears and then walked away? The Old Testament Jehovah who made Sarah barren, consumed Nadab and Abihu in flames, rat-trapped the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah without allowing their repentance, shoved Saul into kingship, only to cut him off, indeed arbitrarily favored the Jews over all other peoples? Him? *That?* A faceless entity whose debilities and crimes we are forced to read of in a Bible of contradictions and contumely, begats and betrayals, in a prose more repetitive and tedious than Sir Thomas Browne's endless paraversations of the quincunx of Roman orchards? Where can the fragilest chain of mercy be discerned in any of his works? Or providence? From a hanging God who exacts of us the act of baptism as a requirement to get into heaven while misendowing us with a world where only 3 percent of the available water is fresh, where less than half the land mass is totally habitable, and where, in consequence of the tilt of the planet and the dark doom in the remnants of its subsequent sunlessness, entire dark continents of people are starving? Our rivers are riddled with myrex, dioxin, PCBs, and no end of toxic chemicals, giving people bone tumors, arthritis, cancer. The whole vast infrastructure of the world is folding and giving way. We are racing headlong toward oblivion. Doesn't mankind by way of the image of its own increasingly lame and pathetic defections create, either by way of weak resignation or blame-shifting transference, the very god by which he needs to be deceived and cozened? Cling to by way of indolence? Depend on to explain his own fracture and unease? Who among the diverse dopes or doctors of this earth can explain that we belong to anything but some baleful and reasonless predetermination far above and beyond us, pilgrims subject less to science than superstition as tragically, obsequiously, we wend our way toward oblivion. We are pawns at best and from the beginning have belonged to many masters. Acorns we are, subject to wind and rain. What gives us iden-

tity and assigns us any significance, without which we might as well be unborn, is, often enough, no human or godly agency at all but mere hap. Call it chance. Or luck. Or fate. Or fortune. But all of us, fortuitously or not, are begotten of the impossible, the unacknowledged, the unforeseen, the occasionally miraculous, and the inexplicable and remain nothing but the poor relation of our accidents and our fates, interwoven ages before our birth, bound like steel hoops to the significances of the most trivial things we touch. God's at fault! And those hypocritical ministers of his who do his bidding on earth. In A.D. 385, a mere eighty-odd years after the last relentless wave of the persecution of Christians, the Holy Church itself—are you surprised?—began to execute heretics, with crow-faced priests in turn pulling the same bullying tactics of the Roman emperors. 'It has been the scheme of the Christian church, and of all the other invented systems of religion, to hold man in ignorance of the Creator; as it is of the governments to hold man in ignorance of his rights,' wrote Tom Paine in *The Rights of Man.* And he was correct. It is a dangerous joke! Religion is merely the false frame or pathetic pretext for the creative energy of man, desperate *or* delighted, but always dependent, as it reaches its summit by way of some oscillating but unreliable exaltation, on a God ready to snuff us out at will, a God who through Christ—see Ephesians 6:5—explicitly sanctions slavery! He forces us into adolescence. It is as though all the people in the world appear to be the same size when, looking down from the perch of his lordly eyrie, he inspects us with the savagery of a Prussian kommandant! Our insistence that he is special deprives us of our own qualities as individuals. Overmastered, we kowtow. Dominated, we cringe. Existence is oppression! What is ever guaranteed us? The promise of eventual loss? Incandescent doubt at every step? From birth it is a constant race, an interminable marathon, to feel good, to eat well, to screw people, to be famous, to get rich, to own everything, to outdo your neighbors, to fuck and thrive and shove your teeming progeny down people's throats, to trample over everyone in your way! Life is *only* about cheating and lies! Faction and friends and fraud! Who you know! Old-boy networks! Connections! Nepotism! Cover-ups! Fixed police tickets! Ginning the polling booths! Money and graft! If you happen to be rich, you can avoid all punishment! Enter the best schools! Marry well! Eat your food off the heads of the poor and the disenfranchised! Elections are stolen! Corporate welfare! Thieving white-collar gangsters! Authority hoodlums! Congressional power

brokers who vote themselves raises at midnight! Corrupt international pharmaceutical companies who have them by the balls and who let senior citizens starve and freeze who, being shaken down, cannot afford to buy medicine and to eat in the same week! Windy, self-inflated politicians who name airports and buildings after themselves! Feather their own nests! Contrive to retire with golden parachutes! As to the world's prelates, didn't Saint John Chrysostom tell us, 'Hell is paved with priest's skulls.' Ours is a world of pilfered hope, renewed disappointment, slaughtered dreams. We are asphyxiated by the very sun we worship. What artist would be the one hired to paint all of this? Cynical Brueghel? Hallucinating Bosch with his pinwheeling vision? Caravaggio with his realistic brush dipped in the offal of our maggoty corpses?"

Ratnaster's black eyes were perpetually fixed, like an insect's. No wink, no blink, no focus. It was as if his springs had finally sprung. His rant filled the church as, almost vibrating, he rose like acrid black smoke to continue the harangue that never seemed to end. "'Jehovah himself took delight in crushing him, he made him sick,' we read in Isaiah 53:10. God is our very own butcher! 'I form the light and create darkness,' the very Lord Himself announces in Isaiah 45:7. 'I make peace and create evil, I am Jehovah that doeth all these things.' Prooftext that, you fat, conniving evangelists with your thumping tubs and wagging Bibles and deceitful intertestamentary trickeries! Solve that, octowussies! Eat your hermeneutics, you fucking unmagical transformeroids! May I ask why we never find those incandescent citations preached from the pulpits? Proposed as rules to live by? Singled out in sermons? Advanced in your twisted theologies?" Ratnaster who was ranting out loud had the mad theologian's precise knowledge of what he hated and actually spoke the citations! "In Scripture, God *admits* he creates evil! He burns complainers alive (Numbers 11:1). He promotes infanticide, rape, and looting (Isaiah 13:15-16). He poisons grumblers with venomous snakes (Numbers 21:5-6). He endorses cannibalism (Jeremiah19:9). He instigates slaughter, rape, and plunder (Deuteronomy 20:13-14). "He afflicted the people of the city, both young and old, with an outbreak of tumors." 1 Samuel 5:9). He orders the seizing of infants and dashing their heads on the rocks (Psalms 137:8-9). He encourages butchering children, thieving land, scorching the earth, and condones the idea of genocide (Deuteronomy 2:31-35). He blesses those who fear him (Psalms 115:13). He kills without compassion (Eze-

kiel 9:5-7) and razes cities (Isaiah 22:5-8) and wreaks vengeance (Hosea 2:1-23) and creates despair (Ecclesiastes 1:1-18) and threatens cruelty (Proverbs 29:1) and emboldens himself out of petulance by the powers of pure terror and vindictiveness and unappeasable revenge (Leviticus 20:6-27). No dictator in this living hell down here more savagely ever shook a fist. Gandhi was correct when he proclaimed, 'God has no right to appear to mankind except in the shape of bread.'"

Looking straight ahead, Duxbak quietly said almost as if to himself, "'I am the bread of life,' said Jesus. John 6:48. 'This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever.' John 6: 58.'This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.' John 6: 51." These were the only sentences that Duxbak spoke that entire day.

Ratnaster, rigid as a Sadducee, ignored him and thundered on. "Who even among the most depraved slaves and thieving and dishonest ratbags on this planet could abide for a minute, never mind worship, that august and authoritative unheavenly autowackocrat described in II Kings 19:35, Deuteronomy 20:11, II Samuel 12:15, Exodus 12:29, and Matthew 27:46? That Dia Boia who in Exodus 4:24 is spoiling to kill Moses and his family on the way to Egypt, until Zipporah intervenes, because one of his lot had not been circumsized? The Lord of the Universe, you mean, who had his only son crucified on the eastern edge of a quarry? The King of Hate! Dark oppressor! Lord of the Death House! Trepidator! The Masked Wizard whose ego glows under in the pleasure of the intolerable riddle of existence he poses for us, while in our vile servitude down here on the earth we refuse to alter or denature him but always dutifully swing a thurible of smoking incense in front of that dark vacancy we still insist he inhabits! No wonder rationalist Thomas Jefferson described that god as 'cruel, vindictive, capricious, and unjust.' The madness of it! How insane to have a hangman God who positively delights in the misery he causes us in whatever form he fosters, whether feudal baron, bullying king, pinchfisted legislator, fat abbot, hypersensitive artist, mean-spirited overseer, chemical demon, bad cop, absolute lord, corrupt dictator, or warmongering president! No wonder as we wander on foot across the dismal, unidentifiable landscapes of this world that most of us are half-crazed and lonely, sick and driven to madness, calling out for succor, deserted utterly in the hills and valleys, mapless utterly, lost in an endless geography of nothingness. No wonder the irrational world we have to

face with its endless series of trials and tribulations, idiocy and illogic, has every attribute of the demon's hell: sorrow, fear, pain, disillusion, doubt, struggle, neglect, bereavement, physical and mental suffering, all of that—and Barry Manilow music to top it all off! Any ignorant Hottentot himself could detect the living lie being fobbed off on us all everyday. 'If God much strong, much might as the Devil,' poor dusky Friday asks Robinson Crusoe, 'why God no kill the devil, no make him no more do wicked?' Would it be because God's own sneak-thieving *scordatura* are responsible for ambushing us in the foul nets of his own devious snares and contrivances and malevolence? His subtle decrepitudes? That perpetual silence in the universe? God is a scold! All his creeping priests and TV ministers, evangelists, monks and monkeys, witch doctors, and rabbis-in-pinwheel-hats who have us plumbing the depths of our own miasmas, probing our disappointments—cornered by shame, chimerical patterns, dreams of hope based on what? Our own sad sufficiencies! We are timid and apathetic crakes! Pusillanimous quietists! Why otherwise do we stand by like common sheep while pedophile priests and nuns—Father Diddler and Sister Nutcase brandishing a ruler—and corporations dripping with money run political candidates past us disguised as human beings? Every faith practices some form of tyranny! We run with frenzied nostalgia into the expectations of a utopia, the very conception of which mocks us, for we are cursed by never having found what we seek to have to keep on looking for what does not exist and so are doomed by that very failure to have to pray! We are living in a fallen and corrupt world where nothing is prohibited but truly finding meaning! Our theologies are built on frights! We have given up our freedom. Ten competent minds are worth more to me than the applause of unthinking multitudes. But where are even *those* ten? We have lost total trust in ourselves, I tell you, blindly preferring the fundamental conception of life *in coram Deo*, 'in God's presence,' instead of *coram nobis*, 'in our own.' We have become communal lamos without intimacy! Slaves to e-mail and instant-messaging via computers and television. Toasters with pictures. The virtues of quiet, contemplation, and meditation have no place in our society because they are held as worthless and unproductive. There is no silence anymore.

What about bovine growth hormones? Today the world is eating Frankenfoods! Tomatoes and radishes and cabbages inseminated with the genes of flounders! Tinkered-with corn! Jigged potatoes. The law

of 'substantial equivalence,' conveniently passed by legislative whores, now freely exempts all genetically engineered foods from being listed on packages, and since we poor simpleton consumers all unwittingly vote each time we shop—scanners are strategies—more of it is headed our way. Apples are flavorless knobs today, tomatoes bland as paper. Chicken, as we know it, tastes like rubber. Animals, standing in one place, are overbred and speed-raised in nearly airless pens they cannot turn around in, the stressful living conditions turning the meat more acidic, lactic, and tasteless, a mush or pale soft exudate bleached of color. Pork has become so lean that packers often have to inject saline marinades directly into the meat—and restaurants must glop it over with heavy sauces—to restore any taste. The Japanese who are fussier consumers buy all the best meat from American slaughterhouses. We are sold the rest.

Only true fury in this infinity of dead ends can save us from the farce of belief: by the deicidal reality of waking up! Nowhere in the Old Testament or in the Gospels is *intelligence* praised as a virtue! Does that mean therefore we should deny it in ourselves? We live in the midst of lies more universal than world hunger and thicker than the wooden forests of Bhutan! How in our desperation could we have projected onto God with such privileged self-delusion and unrealizable faith hope so insoluble, pictures so banal, tears so wet, fantasies so farfetched, dreams so deep, and pretexts so rank, confounding deep gullibility with profound dependence, only to realize with all our insipid contrition anterior to the rages of logic, by some mad arithmetic—a theology of *cringing!*—we have turned our asses into an altar? Why, man himself has performed more miracles than the God he has fabricated! What insanity for us to have created a God and then live in poverty to worship at his shrine!" Ratnaster's scornful laughter rang out as he spun and said, "*Pay attention. Memo to God: die!*"

Then he sat down.

Spalatin said, "He s-seems in a very g-good mood."

To which Mutrux answered, "That's because he has infuriated everybody."

Eugene looked up to see that the funeral service had finally begun. The nondenominational prelate dressed in a dark soutane and farcical white bib to give the sermon on death, a man roped in for the job by a small check got up at the *Quink* office, appeared before the high altar there that resembled something between the cosmetics counter

at Macy's and an old soda fountain where in a vase wilted a bunch of peach-colored dahlias and old-fashioned gomphrena. As the minister spoke words full of perfunctory *inflatio*, he juxtaposed with Holy Writ several outlandish theological ideas of his own and even launched a few new heresies, a commonplace in sermons, zealous or otherwise. After about five minutes of listening Ratnaster blasphemously spat, "The man reads Scripture like a goat pisses, in jerks!" A ghost of Judith that Ratnaster thought he saw turning to glare at him gave him a boost of sudden delight. Eyestones in the meantime had taken refuge in his own mind and, thinking about the slain Jim and Judith San Diego, began to reflect on the *Oresteia* and how in that play the god Apollo, during the trial of Orestes that took place for his murdering his mother, mysteriously explains how the young in fact are not *related* to their mothers, that there is in fact no kinship between mother and child. "The mother is no part of that which is called her child," pronounced Apollo. "She is only nurse of the new planted seed that grows." Pondering the strange sexism of the Bible's "begats," lineage traced only by male gender, and the debated theory that saw women as ovens, children as bread, and men as bakers, Eugene took out a pen and scribbled some notes on various gylanic-versus-androcratic ideas occurring to him with a view to writing about them in a future column.

Was there no kinship between mother and child? If not, where did that lead? To a crucial loss of a sense of place? If so, did that cause such things as Proustian infatuation? Homosexual dependence? No gay man, Eyestones felt, lacks a complicated relationship with his mother, whether of love or hate. It is always a cat's cradle of emotion. Are not gays in film, song, theater, and Broadway shows always recreating their mothers? Isn't the "assuming the position" line from the fashion film *Funny Face*—"One never talks to Maggie Prescott: one only listens"—the definitive gay confession? If their mothers were not mothers, would they not be lovers? Is not the gay's mother ultimately his ur-wife, the one she prevents him from taking elsewhere by biological fiat? And by some kind of psychic bonding, is it not imprinted on him somewhere, one would think very early, that strictly by loving men he is able to maintain his fidelity to his mother and never betray her by transgressing the primordial marriage? What of renowned Madame de Sévigné, one of Louis XIV's paramours, who in her intense if misplaced intimacy—through some gormless perversion of sharing—was

romantically in love with her very own daughter. Eyestones, who had read Sévigné's letters and noted how they inspired Thornton Wilder when he wrote *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, began seriously to wonder if the same kind of thinking had not somehow allowed Laura to see her own mother as a sister, regarding her as another failed or retarded sibling who in that capacity not only could not offer love but had none to give.

Various of the *Quink* contingent, absenting a few, made their appearance as the minister, finishing his short sermon, placed a crucifix on the altar and encouraged everyone to spend some time meditating on the dead. Mutrux, who had lindyhopped in wearing blue shoes and an attitude delivered one of his context-free, drive-by invectives, saying, "Judith was a prick, Jim was a cunt, and Abe was a fruit loop. Next question?"

"I've come across small-ugly before, but that hideous little pee-wee was ludicrous, a creature hardly far enough out of the ground to be sanitary!"

Mr. Fattomale said, "You need a license to go fishing, but any idiot can have children."

"A farmer should have tied a bell around her neck!" said Spalatin, mooing.

"I just loved the skunk-streak in her hair."

Discknickers drew a finger down the jacket of his sleek Armani and quipped with irony, "Why is it that the beautiful ones are always insane?"

"The mother of monobacteria."

"Or worse," said Mutrux, doing a hornpout with raised and wiggling fingers. "Ever dip into Revelation 13:11?"

Little Bob Merkle meanwhile, peering behind him to be certain no one was looking, reached out and pocketed a leather Bible; why not?—it was just lying there. Both Ann Marie Tubb and The Krauthammer had refused to attend the memorial service, as they particularly loathed the San Diegos, and spent the afternoon together on a bench in the Public Garden under a mauve umbrella watching the pretty shopgirls of Boston crossing by the duck pond, for wherever they were was Mytilene. Ratnaster, with his elbows hung over the back of the pew, artificial hand prominent, was now cheekily smoking a cigarette in the chapel. He held the weed in fact in the fingers of that mysterious gloved hand and said, "Oh Christ! Now I've seen everything! Warholic

in a Christian house of God with his two acolytes, Rightly Tightly and Lefty Loosey, the two Screwdrivers!" Warholic, who had come in wearing an open-necked white shirt that gave him the look of a fat rube in Waikiki or an Israeli cabinet member, appeared to be in a bad mood, suffering as he was these past few weeks from a case of rosacea aggravated by too much hot food, excessive bingeing with alcohol, and stressful anger. He threw his overcoat to Muskrat, who, grinning to reveal the red jewel in her front tooth and not fully finalized in the social etiquette of wakes or funerals, playfully swung her purse sewn with death's-head and feather embellishments at Squishy, who, newly wearing a row of rhinestones over each eyebrow, shook her fat breasts and nasally exclaimed, "Is Abe that depressing little weirdo we used to call 'Afterbirth'"?

"None of the Above, try," sneered Mutrux, blowing smoke, "and I'm only here to keep my job."

"I called him Fudgie," said Mr. Fattomale.

"I call you Mr. Orzo."

"I don't call you. I throw meat."

"Fudgie," Varwick giggled to himself. "Fudgie. What won't they think of next?"

Squishy giggled. "His mother called him Eskimo Balls!"

"Used to," stressed Discknickers, pausing to whistle the first eight notes of the "*Dies Irae.*"

Mutrux put in, "I've always said never bet on a game with an oblong ball."

"Thumbless as a bear, homely as rat shit, yellow-skinned, overweight, a father like a mother, and a mother with a scream like a whip. You tell me life's fair," said Gnorm, dolefully shaking his head. "I could puke."

"I think of him as a pscephoceph, because he had no stones below," said Ratnaster, with one eye nictating. Everybody stared at him. "Look it up."

"That yellow remark aimed at me?" asked Mr. Fattomale of Gnorm.

Gnorm snapped, "Sorry, lemonballs?"

"Speaking of the grotesque," said Warholic to Discknickers, pointing to the crucifix. "Here's to the magicianship of Joshua Ben Joseph, late of Nazareth by way of Barnum & Bailey! I compare his death on the cross to a circus acrobat after an interminable sequence of

miraculous performances, not excluding his many plagiarisms from Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, that consummate statesman in the court of King Hezekiah, from whom he manufactured a new religion, all of it topped off by his rising from the dead like yeast farting sugar after a few supernatural fairies from central casting on Easter Sunday pushed away a boulder from the front of the tomb." He put his tongue in his cheek. "Wanna buy a bridge in Brooklyn?"

"'Let his blood be upon us and our children and our children's children,'" quoted Discknickers to the editor. "The gabardine people asked for it."

"Haman!"

"Porker."

"You Jew-baiting quat!"

"Grow a nose."

Pascal was right, thought Eyestones. Men are mad so unavoidably that not to be mad would make one a madman of another order of existence. The reality is that fools and dunces and half-wits alone prevail. We need to be gulled, a fact learned only to be forgotten in the same way that the prettiest dresses are worn to be taken off.

Warholic angrily shoved a pile of hymnbooks down the pew and vociferated, "There is not a single goddamn shred of historical evidence outside the Bible to support the existence of Jewboy there, Mr. Christ *or* those Twelve Mallards of his in tow. My old rabbi, Maggid, from Motol used to tell us that all those fables about Mother Mary sleeping *tsefeesing*—head to foot—with a pigeon was utter bullshit!" He made an obscene gesture. "*Chachmas*!" He waggled a finger toward the altar and farted with a laugh. "Hey Mr. Fattomale, you being my TV man will get a bang out of this. Were electronics ever mentioned in the Bible? The answer is of course yes! When Jesus went up on the mountain to show off and perform one of his magic tricks, he said to Peter, James and John, 'Go, television to no one.'"

Everybody looked in Eyestones's direction. Spalatin giggled and said, "W-well?"

"Well what?"

"Did he exist?"

"This isn't the place for apologetics, is it?"

"Why not, Signor Cervello?" asked Mr. Fattomale.

"Come on."

"There are actually three very definite 'shreds' of evidence of

Christ's existence: in the *Antiquities* compiled by the Roman—and Jewish—historian Josephus; in the *Annals* of Tacitus, another Roman historian; and in *The Passing of Peregrinus* by Lucian of Samosata."

Discknickers who was always ready for such exchanges pointed his finger into Warholic's face and shouted, "Reply?"

"*Kaker punum!*"

"Weak."

"Jesus saves, but Moses invests," said Warholic, smugly. Muskrat and Squishy squealed with delight at the joke, but Spalatin, Discknickers' paladin, cockily fired a hymnbook sliding down the pew into Squishy's buttocks.

"Moses the Egyptian who wasn't circumcised, you mean, and Jesus who was?"

"The son of Moses was."

"By crazy Zipporah, the first bossy bitch in Jewry of the many who followed?" mocked Discknickers and bowed his head. "Thank you, Father Abraham."

"Whose name we reverence!"

"Whose son Ishmael by his mistress Hagar was his first—*not* Isaac! Right, Eyestones?"

Eyestones sighed. All this anticlericalism reminded him of the verbal moils of his brother Marysas. But he shrugged and thought he might as well share the truth. "Concubinage was held as legitimate at the time."

"I doubt it, Johnny Inkslinger," snapped Warholic.

"He's *correct*," Discknickers said, laughing.

"You gizzardless scissorbill," spat Warholic.

"A single wife was not the standard back then," said Eyestones. "I've written about it."

"Plus—" said Discknickers.

"Plus what?" asked Warholic.

"Abraham was not a Jew. He was a Chaldean from Ur. *Aaaand*," chipped in Discknickers sarcastically, looking for all his intellectual fastidiousness like a failed Jesuit and blowing out a blue parachute of smoke from the cigar he had also brazenly lighted in church, "be very careful about writing out the mathematical plus-sign the next time you happen to be configuring a bill or adding up a check in Israel, because the symbol is banned in that pleasant little country. Apparently it too accurately resembles the Christian cross!"

"*Fourchetter!*" snarled Warholic, rising, going incandescent with fury. "*Bliad! Vox vie a tzibel mit' en kup in derard!*"

"Painful to see that Christ went unrecognized and unappreciated and unaccepted as the Messiah by all the money-grubbing sheenies, eh?" asked Discknickers, forever poised to head off a Zionade whenever he feared one, "who, quote, 'loved the glory of men more than ever the glory of God.' John 12:43. A bunch of thieves—"

"Lies," said Warholic.

"They stole from Egypt the gold with which they built and worshipped the golden calf! Where do you think it came from? Cheating each other is what you all do best for fame, for glory, for sex, for advancement, even for food. Why, gluttony—"

"Bullshit!"

"Go and read John 6:24-35! 'You are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill,' Jesus told all those fat-assed kikes in Capernaum who were sprawled out all over the lawn there like porkers in sunglasses from Redondo Beach or Boca Raton or Miami with their greedy hands out simply because Christ saw they were following him only to stuff their bellies! 'All things are lawful, but not all things edify,'" said Discknickers who flicked off an ash from his cigar. "'Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God,' First Corinthians 10:31, OK? 'He hath given food unto them that *fear* him,' Psalm 111:5. Not every fat fool in a phylactery cadging a free bagel like David snatching all that food from that hopeless prick Nabal's wife, Abigail, is worthy of the Lord! As to lies, Chubby, Jews are to lies what Beelzebub is to flies. *It's in the Bible*! Read Matthew 28:15! Why don't you learn some of this stuff? Get a fucking education!"

Warholic was growing incandescent with rage.

"You hateworthy shoebag!"

"Orthodox Jewish men say a prayer every morning thanking God that they are born male and not female. The rest of us give thanks that we were not born Jews," said Discknickers. "If the Jews are God's chosen people, that is all one needs to kniow about God."

"I believe as little in God as I do in luck," pitched in Ratnaster with po-faced gloom.

"You still trammeled in the narrowness of your Jewish thing?" asked Mr. Fattomale.

"Got a problem, Orzo Man?"

"*You*!" blurted Mr. Fattomale, lurching up straight, his nose bent and discolored like a black trumpet mushroom.

"Me? The biggest taboo in world history—*the* unwritten story—is why the Jews have been the objects of scorn by *everybody* for more than two thousand years and counting, pal, from the *sceleratissima gens* of Seneca to the operatic rant of Richard Wagner to the condemnations of Ludwig Feuerbach who in 1841 in *Das Wesen des Christentums* declared, 'The Jews received by the grace of Jehovah the command to steal!'" He looked at Warholic. "Isn't that why all of you have disgusting, criminaloid, low-brow names like Ratsky and Squotz, Slimane and Maggid, Krapnik and Bugczaz, Fingerhold and Criminiczi? Need a wily lawyer? Go to Snatchowitz and Weisel! How about Klaw, Spitzler, Rotman, Jerkhold, Funt, Fox, Clampheim, Winiary, Schift, Fink, Wolfowitz, Snipesheim, Fullgrabe, Klopstein, Molinsky, Bugman, Slutzky, Lurid, Glett, Steingut, Dirshpitz, Wurm, Schiemer, Grubsilver, Winer, Shmooger, Duckshlag, Pushkar, Glanz, Piddler, Sucker and Zucker and Yucker, Sniderman, Kuntz, Clawman, Cates, Skulnik, Mitnaggidim, hideous, Groucho Marx, Solomon Grundy! Hideous, hideous! They echo the filth they embody, the very vices they perpetrate! A fool at one end, a fire at the other. They are the names of buffoons! Filthy humor, bladder jokes, burlesque, goosing someone on stage, any kind of blasphemy for easy money—that is the Jew all over. *Minyan. Bimah. Shalompock. Tachun.* 'The coon is a kike,' said the *Gabbai. Amidah. Amidah* end of my rope! You see?"

"Why don't you stop talking to no consequence and just stick to your regular job—bringing on the Apocalypse?"

" Don't tilt with me in the trials, Warholic. I'm foolproof. Think of me as an uncircumcised prophet."

"I think of you as an irascible, foul-tempered, cruel, mercurial, mentally unstable, borderline psychotic with horseradish for a soul—fucking *chrane*!" said Warholic who in his heart actually believed that hatred of Gentiles was what made Jews truly Jewish. "A batshit sedevacantist with cloven hooves! An anti-Semite from hell!"

"I am from Antioch, the Gentile city," proclaimed Discknickers, blowing smoke, "modern Antakya—Turkey, to you—where the disciples were, by fiat of Divine Providence, called Christians for the very first time and where in 45 A.D. Saint Paul and Barnabas, after leaving Jerusalem, finally had a chance to speak to people who were sane."

Warholic poked a finger. "In Hebrew, *kochlefft*!"

"Wrong—in Greek, Drumbelly! Nobody spoke Hebrew in Jesus' time. Did you hear what I just said? Not a bloody soul spoke Hebrew. Nobody. No one. It was a dead language. Flatter than flawn. What Hebrew anyone knew in that day was on a level with the kind of low kitchen-Latin that was spoken, and very slowly at that, by dimwitted parochial clerics and rank pseudoapostolorum to even dimmer-witted peasants in the Dark Ages a millennium before the scholars resurrected classical learning. As a people, the Israelites never even heard of Yahweh's *name* before all those fireworks on Mount Sinai supposedly took place when even then he was nothing but a revengeful mountain-god—a tall terrifying totem—coming down from his lair to travel with the Jews, so to speak, a big humbo-mumbo who gradually absorbed the demanding functions of the old baals in a land that was geographically limited to a provincial countryfolk who in their vain desperation claimed him as their own. Have you ever heard of Milcom and Chemosh?" asked Discknickers, part of whose wit or strength or cunning was a fidelity to a kind of irrepressible mood he could always manage to find to ride. "They were real gods as well—"

"Listen to this *schmaggegie*!"

"I said listen."

The panjandrum said, "Worm lizard."

"Will *you* listen? I said they were real gods as well, ruling in Philistia and Moab, just as Yahweh ruled over Canaan, the land they stole, which of course gives meaning to land-grabbing Jephthah the Gileadite's protest in Judges 11:24 to a hostile chieftain: 'Wilt not thou possess that which Chemosh thy god giveth thee to possess?' Face it, openly stealing land in God's name, which was of course Israelite policy back then, became the foundation of the country Israel again invaded and possesses today by the same underhandedness, with the lie that when favor is given to one race, land can be extorted from another. What, I'm making this up? Israel filched that country in the first place! Pitilessly drove out the Hivites, Canaanites, Amorites, and Hittites, propping up their bogus nineteenth-century irredentist claim to Palestine, the pending cause no doubt of World War Three! The original landless Habiru, a syncretistic bunch of ugly carrotheads and grim-faced desert mutts and cultists, traversing a long circuit through the center of the Transjordan, pushed into Sihon and Og, shoved through to the land of Canaan, burning cities, stealing cattle, grabbing land—their first bloodthirsty victory was destroying the Amorites—and then

proceeded to exterminate virtually the entire population. Read Joshua 11:16-23!"

"You fucking woodpecker"

"Note that the traditions of the imperialistic patriarchal period—'To your descendants I will give this land,' all that ungodly codswollop in Genesis 12:7—was impiously written down *after* the conquest of Canaan to maintain the official cover-up of the the Canaanite genocide. The Holy Land, my arse!" Discknickers snorted, looking around him for support as he continied his *rattenkrieg*, "No wonder that none of the Hebrew adults who fled Egypt were permitted to enter Canaan—it was a shameless thievery of land the young alone would ignore. I *love* the book of Hosea which not only documents the vileness of the ancient Jews turning from Yahweh to offer all those hypocritical sacrifices to Baal, the god of fertility, their calf-worship, their inordinate pride, and their pagan betrayals, but to anyone who is open-minded clearly links them to the hateful crimes and satanic intrigues of modern-day Israel with its continuous land-grabs, policies of human torture, and consuming genocidal hatred which they daily seek to expiate by shoving valentines into a wall that was not even part of Solomon's Temple but a 100-yard lump of pagan limestone that fenced the political palace of a pig named Herod who wasn't a real Jew in the first place! 'A whirlwind will sweep them away!' Hosea 4:19."

Puffing, Discknickers blew and making a naught into a halo smacked his lips. "Who is surprised that it was a Jew who, like Hitler, believed in the segregation of people who from the first refused to assimilate? Why speak to Jews at all? Was it not Ezra who declared with the hard metallic bite of an avenging prosecutor—chapter nine—that intermarriage among Jews was an abomination? Was it not Amos who, condemning the vileness of Israel, pleaded for justice for the Palestinians? Why, Jesus himself utterly repudiated the Jews! 'I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep,' he told us in John 10:7-9, regarding all of his followers. 'All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate: whoever enters through me will be saved.' '*All who came before me were thieves and robbers*'—exactly who do you think those coruscating words refer to, Sam the Sham and the Pharoahs? Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians? Spin and Marty?" He opened his hands to plead logic. "Jesus never failed to prefer the company of Gentiles. Christ had Gentile blood, traced back through Ruth in the house of David. Haven't you read the book of Ruth? Why

else do you think it's in the Canon? Nazareth was a tiny Jewish village in predominantly Gentile Galilee. Jesus's ministry was there. He was happier and more accepted in Galilee where he grew up as a boy—"

"You're a fucking *genocidaire*!" spat Warholic. "Himmler!"

"—than in carking, contententious Judea, and who would deny that many of his examples reflected the warm, nostalgic feelings he had for that area? The lilies of the field. The sowing and reaping of crops. The shepherds caring for their flocks. The nets thrown into the Sea of Galilee that were filled with fish of every kind, unlike the salty and infernal Dead Sea called Lake Asphaltitis down in the wilderness of Judea which is not only the lowest body of water in the world but sounds like a horrendous venereal disease. That was the area that Christ loved. In the city of Jerusalem he was considered an outsider, where men were jealous of his influence, whereas Galilee was familiar ground for him and people loved him. No prophet had ever come from Galilee. In the opinion of the Judeans, none ever would. Most Judeans disdained those Jews who came from Galilee and who made up only one third of the area's mixed population. The only one of the Apostles who was not a Galilean but who was born in Kerioth, a Judean town, was the apostate and arch-betrayer, Judas, who of course loathed that any Galileans were preferred to him. Joseph and Mary were both Galileans. As was Mary Magdalene. So, as I say, were Peter and Andrew and the others. The young man spent his days only a few miles from a hill dominated by the splendid new city of Sepphoris, a Gentile city only six miles north of Nazareth, and in his teens wandered hour after hour around Mount Tabor and southeast to Mount Morah and to the far ridge of Gilboa way beyond that. Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount in Galilee. He was supernaturally Transfigured in Galilee. He performed his first miracles in Galilee, turning water into wine and walking on water and healing the blind, the paralytic, and the possessed. The first place Christ went after he was resurrected rom the dead was not to Jerusalem, notice, but rather to Galilee. 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee,' we read in the Gospels. In his illumination, he says, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.' Matthew 28:7-10. You will also note that Joseph and Mary upon returning from their exile in Egypt came back specifically to Galilee, his land, a place of safety, fully bypassing Judea and its dangerous purlieus where fanatical Archelaus and his fiends had succeeded his demented father,

King Herod, as the serpent tetrarch. In the end it was for the people in Galilee that Christ spent his time, and because of him," explained Discknickers, "'the people living in the darkness—Matthew 4:16—have seen a great light.'"

Mr. Fattomale pleaded with Eyestones, "Put him down, Mr. Styptic. This is inhuman vitriol. A toxic squib. Shoot him with a ricin pellet!"

"Throw that man a fishhead and some rice," said Discknickers pointing to Mr. Fattomale.

Discknickers, who always served in the office as a small, pointed vector of malfeasance, was a true monomaniac. His favorite opera was *Lohengrin*, the opera that Hitler himself when a youth worshipfully saw ten or more times. He annually threw a commemorative party at his house every evening on November 11, the date in 1938 of the *Kristallnacht*. He claimed to be a paid-in-full member of Florida's exclusive Indian Creek Country Club on the basis of nothing more than the fact that they exclude Jews. He delighted in irking any unsympathetic visitors to his office by keeping in full view a reproduction of Adolf Hitler's sketch of the Palace of Schönbrunn. "Who wants to play 'Who's the Jews?'" he used to ask, a game he invented to see who among them watching any—or every, he would insist—television show, could compile the longest list of all the actors, producers, and directors of those who had changed names to hide their identity. He was not shy. He once told Eyestones in all seriousness, "I specifically left New York City in order to avoid seeing Likudniks every time I went out the front door."

"You know nothing," snarled Warholic.

"I know the law."

"Snool! Megadick!"

"The true and actual law, that is. Not any of those half-witted Jewish laws found in the Talmud, that handmanual for the bandit, the corrupter, the social destroyer," said a mocking Discknickers, who happily quoted several examples: "'Swinging a fowl overhead grants you a release from sin.' 'It is an ill-omen to marry in May.' 'Never write the name of God with a pen newly dipped in ink.' 'Don't wear leather shoes on Yom Kippur.' 'Three married brothers should not dwell in the same town.' 'Never go for a walk wearing a single slipper.' 'It is unlucky to dream of seeing a king.'" He snickered. "All of it bugger up a teapot. No, I know the real law. 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth come through Jesus Christ.' John 1:17. Read the

Gospels sometime, Toucan Nose. Color can be concealed; movement cannot. I make it a habit of reading the book of Hosea once a week: a complete vanquishing of Israel and all the rats and rodents and wedge-esnouts who run it." He smiled. "To the Hebrews, remember, a trick is always a treat."

"You filthy twisted pervert," said Warholic.

Discknickers smoothed down his tie. "Father Abraham knew that his sacrifice to kill Isaac asked nothing of him, since his son would be raised from the dead. What a joke. Look at Hebrews 11:1-16. It was a dumb show, all of it, hard bargaining with Jehovah as told by the actors who knew that figures can't lie but liars can figure. A sprat to catch a mackerel. You lot can bargain the balls off a brass monkey."

"You should get cancer."

"I should die?"

"Yesterday is too soon."

"Then who would cook your books for you, Mrs. Niddah?" It was a sentence both offered and arranged—and so received—as periodic.

Pivoting angrily, Warholic turned to Ratnaster, who with eyes like singlass and hanging that hanging hand was standing coldly aloof and who some in the office—and the fellow never denied it—claimed was a Jew. The editor said, "You!"

"Yes?"

"Don't you give a shit, ever?"

"About what?"

"Anything."

"Specifically?" queried the expert in disillusion, for whom death disease, and decomposition not so much presided over as constituted the laws of life.

"Jews. The Holocaust. Stuff."

Ratnaster snorted. "Mandaean theology, sir, regards *both* Christianity and rabbinical Judaism as bogus religions that along with the negative influence of planets and stars impede a soul's release from bondage." He took a long haust from his cigarette. "Souls? Religion? Manda d'Hayye? Queer rabbinicals? Eyewash."

"You're a *blut-tsaper*, an apostate, an enemy of your own people!" Warholic who had his fist in his mouth almost swallowed it. "You don't give a fuck."

"I despise existence. If this world is corrupt, if modern civilization is racing toward doom, if every one of us is implicated in the

suicide of the species running headlong to the abyss like lemmings, then may I ask why the specific details of who exactly killed whom, when and where and how, should be of any particular significance to me or to you or to anyone?" Angrily shaking it, Ratnaster's mechanical hand made clapper sounds. "Didn't Archimedes tell us long ago that if you add something to itself enough times, it will exceed any other number in magnitude? I tell you, history isn't bunk. *History is self-promotion!* People are sheep! A crooked, shambling, squint-cornered, amorphous botch of imbeciles and poltroons! Immethodic waste! A stoneheap! Dumb, fucking apple-balls! Men are the 'apes of God.' Joseph Cotten was quite correct in *Shadow of a Doubt* when he remarks, 'Do you know if you ripped the fronts off houses, you'd fine swine?' Karl Marx knew the truth. Humans, he said, are the only members of the whole creation who are not worthy of the God who supposedly created them and their world—although for me it is difficult to believe that Omnipotence needed so vast a setting for so small and transitory a result—which is nevertheless where Marx and I differ. To be worthy of God, we have to learn to be as cruel and fully arbitrary as he is. God! 'He who placed man in circumstances,' as philosopher Bertrand Russell says, 'which made it certain we would sin in order that He might have the opportunity of exercising the virtue of justice by punishing us!' But why should things be better? As if the cause of the universe were even a mind! Why not ascribe the origin of Nature, if not this place of hell, to an act of generation rather than to a *mind*? There is something so devious about the verminous pedophile clerics in this country, ignorant, fatuous, narrow, stupid—do please stop me before I run out of euphemisms—that I can scarcely believe they can stomach the church they pretend to service! No pathetic empirical analogy, including that of design, in spite of fat Thomas Aquinas, the dumb ox, can *possibly* suffice to establish a single religious principle! Have you not read David Hume?"

"Don't you believe in anything?" asked Varwick, looking serious. "*Anything*?"

"To which I would answer yes."

"What?"

"Summer is warmer than winter. Animals are more moral than humans. John Wayne even at the very peak of his form was far and away the worst actor in the history of filmmaking." He shrugged. "Two-thirds of the human population goes to bed hungry every single

night."

"And?"

"Weebles wobble but they don't fall down."

There was nothing new that Eugene Eyestones heard in either Ratnaster's rancid and blasphemous fulminations against God ("Jehovah like every Irish tenor sounds like a sheep bleating") or Discknickers's crass anti-Semitism ("The Hebrew scribes stole the idea of Genesis from ancient Egypt") coupled with mad Warholic's intemperate howls of execration against Christ. They clawed and fought like fractious eggheads at faculty meetings every time they met. It proved to him only once again that if truth indeed was bigger than proof, it nevertheless depended on it, reinforcing his idea, long held, often proved, that the sexual principle so clearly delineated in man and woman what might otherwise never be understood that it was worth all the time he spent on it to shape his theories. An old dog for a hard road. Was it not all Freudian in character? Ratnaster's reality principle was antilibidinous by dint of the maimed affliction that clearly informed his vile attacks against God the Father, his maker, raging anarchy against authority. But then, thought Eyestones, who despised credulity but admired faith, had not Freud assured us that anti-Semitism was rooted in the unconscious by jealousy over the Jewish claim of being the "firstborn, favorite child of the Father"? While Jews, on the other hand, skeptical, it seems—not unlike E. M. Cioran, who once wrote, "For two thousand years Jesus revenged himself on us for not having died on a sofa"—from the very first held a grudge against the new religion that had been torn from its rib, born of its very loins! If Christ's life and death, at least weighed on a human scale, was not completely a struggle against Jehovah ("My father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me," Matthew 26:39, etc.), was it not in a sense at least a triumph over Jehovah in that *agape* (*eros*)—Christ incarnate, Christ the pontifex, Christ become man—overthrew the rules of the Old Law? His was a liberation of love! Jesus the Redeemer in the flesh, the deification of the Son sitting beside, equal with, the Father. It seemed to Eyestones that there was sexual envy among Christians of the Jewish claim to be the "chosen people" just as there was invidiousness among Jews who experienced the overthrow of the king-father by Christ.

Thus endethed the lesson!

It was pride over compassion. We are not socialized into inferiority, thought Eyestones. We demand by imposition that it be accepted as a

legacy of war, for just as a beautiful thing like Rapunzel confers on the perceiver the gift of life, an evil thing makes bilious our appetite and only blackens our talons for attack.

"An exegetical point?" said Eyestones, motioning to Discknickers. "Christ was once almost killed by Galileans. One sabbath he visited a synagogue in Nazareth. Rabbis, to mock his godhead, handed him a parchment roll: Isaiah, chapter 61. He read it and, handing it back, said to them, 'This day as you listen, this scripture is fulfilled.' They immediately planned to shove him over a cliff, even though like them he was a Galilean, for they were infuriated that a local carpenter's son saw himself as the Son of God —I happen to know the passage is Luke 5:16-30 because just as the VC had sought my life a chaplain read it to me by candle one late night in a hospital in Saigon. Christ never went to Nazareth again."

Conspicuously absent among the group at the service was the morbid transsexual, Larry Clucker, who, having gone down to Walpole to visit hapless Abe at Norfolk Prison, where he was presently being held on murder charges, threw a hissy fit in the front lobby not only because the antique bisque googly-doll he had brought along to cheer Abe up had been confiscated but also because he himself had been immediately prohibited entrance for having appeared in the visitor's room wearing a bright, frilly, cane-colored frock, nylon hose, and seven-inch black high heels. To the astonished guards there he looked like one of those creatures from outer space who rose above Flash Gordon's sparkle-craft to eat and digest humans!

"Little Bob Merkle just nobbled a *Bible*," squawked Mutrux. "Christ, I've seen everything!"

"Churches screw *us*!" said Bob, comically bobbing his white head forward, the hair of which, all goosed up from the rain, looked like a ham frill. He didn't care what they thought and began humming "Slow Ride" by Foghat.

Like everyone else, Eyestones was well aware of Little Bob Merkle's sticky fingers. When Laura had moved to River Street a few years before, her mother insisted she remove everything she'd brought with her, and because the flat was so small she had to sell most of her things. Little Bob Merkle not only relieved her of much of it, but after he left in his van she found a lot of her valuables missing.

"Speaking of screwing," said Warholic, craning his bulbourethral head back and snarling, "I'm serving my ex-wife with papers next

week, pal. I'm going to make that spavined-looking, pinchfaced, *schnorrer* bitch squeal like a fucking shopping-cart wheel!"

"Why?"

"Because she's a cheat," said the editor, who turned around to bloviate on his favorite subject, "a whore, a desperate sneaking, totally artificial hanger-on, a fucking *ontgetshepter*, and a python-spitting she-devil who deserves to go to hell with all her diseases on her head, OK?" He coughed a last insult. "*Putzfrau*!"

"'I love you without dignity and without regret,'" mocked Mutrux, hand over his heart, quoting one of the endlessly moronic lines from *The Fountainhead.*

"All women are cheats," said cynical Discknickers, stubbing his cigar out on the back of a pew in an explosion of sparks. "Laura, you name it, Joan Crawford, Mrs. Katzenjammer, Sweet Little Alice Blue Gown, Dolly Dimples, Juliet's nurse, Mother Hubbard, St. Cecilia, Judith San Diego, the hysterectomy pants who just got greased. Try this trick sometime: Say to your wife or your girlfriend out of the blue, 'You've met someone else. I've got proof of it. It's not a question of you admitting to it, will you accept a large gift to discuss it?' In nine times out of ten, she will sheepishly reply, 'Yes.'" He smugly tapped a finger under an eye. "I've said it a thousand times. John Calvin was right. We're all of us tragic liars and depraved. Couples are by definition all co-dependents. Coupledom is about adulteration. Those who need support, who need to share, are to my mind no different than cripples. It is an aspect of stupidity, never mind sloth, to need people—seriously! Intelligent people need solitude *to think.*"

Warholic's big nose twitched. "Listen to the opera singer: *me, me, me, me, me*!" He looked at Discknickers. "I'd like to sue you—for goose-stepping!"

"Who's your law firm?" asked Discknickers. "Gammon, Bacon, Hamm and Schinken?"

Gnorm, who was late, shoved into the pew as Eugene Eyestones slid over, and, boxing the marquee of a headline with his hands, muttered, "Angry Dwarf Offs Awful Dorks." He cackled with laughter. "Will someone please explain to me how the world is any worse?" Abe, short, hairy, and hapless, suffered from cruel obscurity, Eyestones sadly realized. Abuse. Neglect. Condescension. Revenge. Inattention. The murderer must first hate himself in order to kill, a victim to his own life. The root of Eyestones's personal pessimism, of course, was not

world-contempt but to a degree self-contempt, for however mercilessly he might yearn to annihilate institutions and persons in his talk, he never spared himself. It was always first and foremost at himself that he aimed his shaft. He always felt undeserving, knew that he never belonged, held *himself* in suspicion, remorselessly directing against himself his full imagination, the whole of his thought whirling in air. The realm of the air is our non-actual, flyborn, satanic Lord-of-the-Flies unreality, the state of unguardedness and raging helplessness and dissatisfaction and waving failure. As he sat there in the chapel, he looked around at his brazen, brainless brothers and realized overwhelmingly that he himself was no better than a co-religionist. It was beyond sadness in its implications. We surveil only as far as our sight in this world is satisfied.

"Oh, Christ, here comes Tangle Tits," groaned Mutrux, covering his eyes. His sharp nose like a maul seemed to bang open anything it confronted.

"I thought I smelled lilacs!" said cross-eyed Gnorm, Wynken looking at Blynken and Nod—his head—the size of a pail. He refused to move over. Chasuble, cradling a black miniature poodle with its strategically shaven body and fluff bracelets, slipped into a pew in front of Eyestones, turned, and asked, "Am I the thing?" He was all dressed up, and the air reeked of heady cologne. "It's a fashion idea I got from *Christopher Strong* where Kate Hepburn, God bless her, shows up in that silver lamé sheath with a Dracula collar and antennae. Just fabu-luscious!" Setting down the poodle and slipping its leash around his arm, he did a quick Bette Davis swishy hand and hip roll and carefully checked himself with a pocket mirror. "Notice the linen napkin with hand-faggoting! Do you like it? Theme is my religion. Oh, a must." He adjusted his collar, which he prissily wore poked up like a Ruritanian heroine, and on his forefinger was a single onyx. "Or should I have worn my grey Fioravanti suit? Lavender and grey is very hot now. I wore this item to the *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* premiere."

"In Boston?"

"Hollywood, try," said Chasuble, folding his dog to his breast and coyly sniffing. "I took a few weekdays for myself. Moribund art revives without me? I don't think so." He nosed his poodle and patted his little bottom. "This is Oinky the Porkchop. I decided not to take my two cats, James and Whistler, named *not* for the painter, thank you, but after Garbo's driver and Garbo's maid, respectively." He sniffed. "I once

owned a pink Persian kitten, Ataxerxa. I do not mean white or red. Ever happen to see one, mmm? They are called 'creams.' When Ataxerxa was all curled up, she looked like a huge pink powder puff. Then one day my rare little pink cream passed away, and I never looked at another. So Abe went off his rails? Oh well, dirt-nap time for the San Diegos. I couldn't stand either of them, God forgive me. She screamed like a whip, and he couldn't find his bum with both hands." He bussed Oinky the Porkchop with a burrowing, smothering nose. He looked up. "I adore the subject of wacky deaths. Wacky deaths? Oh please—I live for them! Did you know that Anthony Trollope died laughing? So did one of Charles Dickens's sons. Saint Theodosia was dragged to the Forum and killed with a ram's horn that was thrust vigorously through her neck, poor dear. Softly beautiful Florence Lawrence, the Biograph Girl—and Hollywood's first star, people—committed suicide"—he clapped shut his poodle's ears—"from eating a tube of ant paste, how d' ya do! Poor Harlow repeatedly peroxided her hair and got uremic poisoning. She was of course adorable to the nth. One qualifies it with 'reckless,' needless to say, and, um, of course 'braless,' for immediacy of identification. But for me, for you, for all of us, Harlow must always remain the ineffable tout court of *Reckless, China Seas,* and of course another one of my all-time favorites, *Dinner at Eight.* Kurt Gödel, the math genius, starved himself to death from a fear of germs. I had an awful uncle who once had the bad luck to sneeze in close traffic in Elkhart, Indiana, cross a divide, and get himself walloped and killed by an oncoming semi driven by a man with head like a scallion. A friend of mine in Manhattan named Roberta once told me of some poor soul who farcically died of peritonitis by mistakenly eating a dowel in a tiered wedding cake! And don't you remember Little Bob Merkle's father nodding off during a 'senior moment' drove his C-rental into the pediment of the Eiffel Tower and—oh Jesus, kabob-time!—got impaled on a strut? A nerd I went to college with was gored by one of those heavy merciless staples, the size of an ostrich toe, maniacally trying to rip out an article from a *National Geographic.* Served him right for subscribing to a magazine with all that ugly ice-cream color photography and texts written for four-year-olds. I recall reading about an elderly patient in a Sarasota, Florida nursing home who was bitten to death by 1625 fire ants. Another died of sudden anaphylactic shock due to aspirin. A prisoner at Walpole on the drug Prolixin, which weirdly compels a person desperately to want to bend over and stretch, watch

your tongue!—an odd compulsion known as akathesia—literally bent over backward and snapped his spine!" Chasuble raised an odd subject. Once on an R & R in Bangkok Eyestones saw a hapless fellow get hit flat on the head—and fatally impaled!—by the lethal green spires on the shiny shell of a durian falling from a fifty-foot tree.

"What's this blown in?"

"Buggery balls!"

Upon seeing the strippers, Muskrat and Squishy, Chasuble looked skyward and groaned out loud. "A distinct aura of t-r-a-s-h," he spelled, "suddenly perfuses the room. Sukie Slurp and Lizzie Lollipops, the Vacuum Sisters! Be still, my *cuore*!" He began talking too loud out of embarrassed anger and doing a double-take peering closer as if checking the radiation around himself spoke his lines to a mythical auditor in front of him. "My God, will you look at those two? Shouldn't they be outlawed for wearing ice-cream shoes in late autumn? Forget the hair like a loofah! Is that sheath of bargain-basement lime-green polyester chenille intentionally ruched to resemble the casing of a caterpillar? And will you look at the resoundingly dumpy clothes"—Chasuble was the only person on earth who bothered to give the word *clothes* its full and accurate pronunciation—"that those two *vacca* are wearing? Wait, wait, don't tell me: Las Vegas soundstage? Culver City cowgirl? Stars and stripes forever? But isn't that the circus disaster signal? Or is it L.A. Confidential? How *so* not interesting! That's where I go to get my ass waxed! A few years ago I had the reverse luck to see those two ugly-as-shit fluffies perform in an elevated cage in the Golden Banana up on Route 1 in Saugus, which was not exactly Garbo in *Two-Faced Woman* doing the chica-choca with Robert Alton, believe me! I can understand couples bouncing a little soigné off each other but—"

"Hey Jazzable, ya hear about the new breakfast cereal named Queerios?" asked Muskrat with a knowing snort. "You add milk and they eat themselves!"

He paused on the cusp of a petulant impromptu.

"Ignore it," said Eyestones.

Chasuble floriferously disagreed.

"'There are only two things I dislike about you—your face,'" he declared to Muskrat and with flaring nostrils of sarcasm whispered aside to Eyestones, "Liz Taylor to Kim Novak in *The Mirror Crack'd*. 1968."

Squishy said, "Rubber queen."

"That a mommy tummy, Miss Priss?" he asked, turning toward

Squishy. "No? Then there's a woman here in a muumuu, and she's wearing your kitchen."

"Take your worried penguin act somewhere else."

"Keep wolfing pizzas, trashette," he said, pecksniffing and, with haughtily closed eyes, sweeping back his hair with an index finger beneath a curl, a Noël Coward gesture. "You can have a second career as a futon!"

"Butt pirate!"

"Hippo!"

"Fruitcake!"

He turned to Eyestones. "I'd take it all seriously if the source were other than two slutty and ignorant no-bra-wearing pie wagons."

"My mother made me a homosexual," mimicked Squishy, Muskrat gaily flapping her wrist in the direction of Chasuble—and here both women tossed smoochy-smoochy sounds at him—while Muskrat sarcastically replied, "If I gave her the wool, would she make me one, too?"

"I've always liked pants wide in the ass," said Squishy, standing up to flash her breasts.

Muskrat asked, "Who dressed you, the people from Cinerama?"

Chasuble nodded in assent. "*Aaaaaand* VistaScope, Technirama, Cinemiracle, Delrama, CinemaScope, CameraScope, Todd-AO, Superscope, Vistarama, Thrillarama, VideoScope, VistaVision—" he snapped his fingers, "oh, and Panorama! So don't fuck with me, bulldogface. I *am* cinema!"

"Don't you also bend over to say hello?" asked Gnorm from a straight face.

"Tuck it!" mouthed Chasuble, with bow lips.

"I'm serving my ex-wife with papers next week, pal, that's all I know," said Warholic, sweadnetting through the open shirt bunched up under the jacket of his ugly rust-black suit. "I'm going to split her *kishkes*. Whatever Christ-bitten cruelty I can exact upon that ragbag, consider it done." He farted. "*Ein se zachen! Zol nor shtinken von kup und fees*!"

Gnorm, who hated Chasuble, pointed to his dog and said, "Bull the wool from that little cross-eyed snotbox, won't you, and do the world a favor?"

"I love your jacket," sniffed Chasuble, regarding Gnorm's outlandish blazer with a sour look as if he had just detected a bad smell, and

said, "Big pockets. Immense drape. The Cargo look. They bringing it baaack?"

Disgusted, Gnorm stood up, mooned Chasuble, and moved across a series of pews.

"The same goes for that chic, overflavored, out-of-date-Aspen, snowboard-inspired, billiard-ball-striped sweater of yours," Chasuble called nastily after him. "Exactly what color is that: Neapolitan ice-cream?"

"It's confetti, Poofie Girl. Wanna get married?"

Ratnaster quacked, "You both suck."

"Eat me," said Chasuble.

"Don't be so disingenuous," said Mr. Fattomale to no one in particular. Could he have been addressing one of the ball-cheeked angelic figurines in bas-relief holding up one of the struts of the marble canopy in the chapel?

"'List while I woo thee with sweet melody,'" sang Mutrux, cutely playing his index finger into his cheek and then slipping Chasuble the bird.

"What a fruit fly," said Muskrat.

"Remind me to will you my earrings and handbag, won't you, Chasuble?"

"And I'll will you all of my bras," added Muskrat, "except they might be too small."

"Remind me, both of you, before I go, to tell you and that other hairy feature-creature you walk around with, Betty Barefacts or Fanny Fairfax or Edna Earwax or whomever, about the time I looked into the arsehole of an artichoke, OK?" angrily snarled Chasuble à la Bette Davis. "Oh and by the way, the size of the bra is always directly improportionate to the size of the head of the bimbo wearing it. Remember that. Chasuble's Rule #13." He turned to Eyestones in blowing exasperation. "Jesus, are they bookends or what, that capybara couple? Eighteenth-Century Foxes! I honestly don't know whom I loathe more, them or those two ugly, bespotted spheroid puffer-fish at the office—*Sphaeroides maculatus*—whom I have waking dreams about killing with a fish club! And that Gnorm, someone should really do him a favor and pinch him to death! Shouldn't he be hastened into a straitjacket? Does he own a scorpion necktie? Seriously, doesn't he have the same scary face and weird robotic demeanor of Robert Walker in *Strangers on a Train*: cruel, flat, empty, shiny, and demented? I mean, nobody

home, Eyestones! He even eats popcorn—ever notice—with the same mechanical, swiveling munch, doesn't he? Remember the way he so insanely fingered for kernels in that bag o' shwag? I have to confess I once had an early affair with a weasel like that, a jug-eared older man who, after picking up a younger version of me in the middle of Bryant Park behind the New York City Library, proceeded to savage me only *beginning* with love slaps—forget the 'Princeton Bob'—in a room at the Biltmore on 42nd Street where I was staying which back then had a ten-dollar-a-night student rate!"

"Maybe he killed the San Diegos!" said Varwick. "Maybe he killed them."

"The whole family was demented. Why is it a suicide if your clone kills you?"

"I'm surprised they didn't kill themselves," said Discknickers.

"Why don't *you*?" said Chasuble, cradling his poodle closer, protectively.

Discknickers smiled. "I once thought of trying to kill the world's greatest lover," he said, smoothing back his hair, "but then I realized suicide is wrong."

Mutrux said, "Why don't you give it another try? I'll defend you in court and charge you only double the fee, because you're a friend."

"I'd infinitely rather have a Jew defend me if I ever committed a crime," said Discknickers, nodding in Warholic's direction, "like the Round One over there, the redoubtable Mr. W. I would want someone wily."

"What kind of crime?" asked Warholic, "would you be capable of committing? Calumny?"

"Probably murder," said Discknickers to Warholic, poking a gun-finger. "Batmandon't. Katmando! Unfortunately," he instantly added, "after I committed the crime, *you* wouldn't be around to defend me."

Spalatin tapped Discknickers' arm. "This is supposed to be a f-fucking f-funeral service?"

Discknickers said in a thick Franconian accent, "It is just so, Cydrax. Except that in this instance we bury everybody. It's part of the ritual."

Chasuble, who had been nervously flicking his fingers up and down in the air, rapidly like crazed semaphore, leaned over conspiratorially to whisper to Eyestones, "I cannot stand being here another minute. Do you happen to remember Garbo's sensible advice on party-going,

Quattrocchi? I should have paid heed to it. She inimitably declared, as only she could have, 'Never refuse. Accept and then don't go. Nobody ever misses anybody.'" Then scooping up his black poodle, Chasuble rose and said, "Love ya, mean it, gotta go," whereupon turning on his toes he flounced out of the chapel without once looking back.

"I have never attended a wedding that wasn't a funeral," whispered Eyestones to Mr. Fattomale and Varwick, who, crouching behind him during the brief service, uncharitably whispered about how all her life the short, hatchet-faced Judith San Diego had bullied her short, weak, chinless husband, Jim. "Pussywhipped the poor bastard. Pussywhipped him!" "But who got the biggest salary?" snoopily asked Little Bob Merkle, sliding down the pew like a white pink-eyed rat. "Who cares? They all personally despised each other's fat asses, let's face it," said Discknickers, plucking a speck of lint from his sleeve, "so I say it's just as well that they're gone, not that I believe in all that afterlife hoodoo with cherubs and all. Except that, you know something? I have always wondered in the end why creatures like that have ever bothered to collect things in the first place—books, statues, antiques. You know? Do you see what I'm saying? I mean why bother to own anything if you are homely?"

"What?"

"Ugliness can't improve." He shrugged. "What, you're going to tell me it can?"

"Right. Look at Petruchio Fattomale and his pants," said Gnorm, guffawing up his sleeve.

"That's fascism!" said Mr. Fattomale, stroking his long odd nose.

"Another moonbat heard from," said Discknickers.

Mr. Fattomale insisted, "It is!"

"Oh, the planetismal impact," mocked Discknickers, a hand to his brow. He assumed the declaratively innocent voice of Stan Laurel and quoted, 'You know, Ollie, I was just thinking.' 'About what?' 'Nothing. I was just thinking.'"

"You're such a prick," said Mr. Fattomale.

Discknickers, who loved doing imitations, then made the sound of a Muscovy duck: dry hoots. He said, "In college I knew a couple named Schreiner who in their wide-bottomed, Barnum-like fat-assedness as they came and went looked to all of us like tramping clowns—we used to call them The Balloons—and the money they both spent on clothes in the way of a tux on a monkey only made both of them look *worse*!"

"I, I, I tell you," said Spalatin, stuttering like a Bach cantata, "these b-bastards don't have, don't, d-don't have a sense, a s-sense, of humor."

Mutrux leaned over to Eugene and chidingly whispered, "Take a hint, Dr. Eckleberg."

"Meaning?"

"You mean that doesn't apply to Laura Warholic?" sneered Mutrux, looking back knowingly at Discknickers. "That hole, that lick, that warlock, that alcoholic of war? The Warhol who cannot paint, you mean? Haven't I already told you about that thin wailing slag in her San Francisco days, Eyestones, when she was married to Warholic, about the two of them making up the ugliest duet since the cinematic heyday of Heckle and Jeckle way back in the Thirties? I mean, that nose alone!"

"Toucans can c-catch frozen peas in their mouths," said Spalatin, satirically wagging an index finger from between his eyes as a witty beak. "One: You have been warned. Two: Truth is handled f-fruit. Three: Never buy a television from someone in the s-street who's out of breath, especially someone d-dusky."

"And?"

"She's presently getting her t-taco tickled by some dumb alcoholic r-rock 'n' roller over in Cambridge just like she did in San Francisco. And that no doubt includes white-water-wristing the whole b-band. You know?" He grabbed the full of his crotch. "Shaking h-hands with the Governer and all of City Hall!"

"You know this?"

"I know the g-group. I stood in on g-guitar for them."

"Sounds right to me. She'd hump a hippo for a half a dollar. Sneakiest thing to shit between two shoes."

"Jealous?" asked Discknickers, doing a puppet voice.

"She could go bang a zebra, for all I care," said Mutrux, whispering low so that Warholic could not hear. "I'd rather sleep with a pod person. I recall once taking off her bra, a good example of an art anomaly, unrelated—like Joan Miro's ceramic mural at UNESCO headquarters in Paris—to the structure that it was intended to enhance."

Gnorm said, "I thought she was doing the nasty with that Cow Cow coon from Kokemo, that cue-ball with the tapered pants, two-toned shoes, and limousine feet?"

"Throw in a purple porkpie hat."

"Maybe him, too."

"A black-and-white cow."

"Who was it said, 'There are two things I've never seen: An ugly woman and a pretty monkey'? Wrong about the woman. Right about the monkey."

He looked into Eyestones's caring, bespectacled eyes but found no response.

"I'll be taking her to the cleaners next week, pal," said Warholic, working some residue out of his teeth with the angle of a probing fingernail. "Don't worry."

"To the cleaners for?"

Warholic glowered like a muskellunge. "Major money." He grabbed Muskrat and Squishy with each arm, smooching them, and then burped in the direction of the altar. "I'll hit the bitch with everything from a tire tube to a window weight. She's got nothing in the bank, you say? Don't give me that *bubba meisses*. I'll punch her in the umbo! I'll bang the pan-head! I'll squeeze her nose till it begins to drip buffalo nickels!"

"What a cheap miserable b-bastard," muttered Spalatin under his breath.

"The bigger the roll, the tighter the elastic," muttered Discknickers.

"I'll become her goblin," he said. Squishy helpfully leaned up to his ear, whispering something. "Right," he added, "unless she dreams about herself."

With a banging of a side-door, hydrocephalic Larry Clucker suddenly appeared, looking like a half-witted diplodocus, and walking into the chapel he indignantly shouted, "Operation Change the Subject?" He was wearing with his head in a kerchief a pair of transparent hair-coloring gloves and, along with pedal-pushers, low-heeled women's pumps. Little Bob Merkle stood up and immediately walked out of the chapel with deliberate speed.

When he heard the swelling organ that closed the hollow funeral service, Eugene knew now with certitude that the barrage of insults, the din of this unnatural gathering, so often repeated, also announced itself, totemically, as a funeral for his job with the journal. He decided to leave, to quit. As a comfort he went inside his mind and began daydreaming about his beautiful Rapunzel in the sun-washed light skipping across his heart in a dress of floating wheat-colored gauze,

suddenly heard an echo of Mutrux's words in his ear and began thinking of Laura Warholic's ongoing paraphilia—surely it was a fetish paraphilia—for rock musicians. Hadn't it been the dominating feature of her love-map from the first second he knew her? Was it also not anti-father? Masochistic? Was it a guitar fetish? An outlaw fetish? If not that, what? Did it go back to the devotees of wandering Orpheus? David the psalmist? The Gongorists? The French troubadors? With her it was clearly more than music. It was the chaos, the disorder, the riot, that phony, neo-Dionysian, scare-your-parents pretension underneath the pose. It was only another one of her theatrical mannerisms. Paraphilia. It was a love of things outside the usual, a taste for, a passion for, the odd. She had a distinct penchant for other paraphilias. For example, was not the abrupt, pushy domination she loved in men a predatory paraphilia? Force turned her on. Men with big thighs and overimposing shoveability. Oafs, fit as a butcher's dog—the kind like big, ham-cheeked pigtail back there in Fairyland, Tennessee, thought Eugene, when they were traveling the *abyss d'Amérique.* The very act of wangling money from men, a mercantile paraphilia, also gave Ms. Laura Shqumb from Wampsville, New York, a thrill right down to color, cut, clarity, and carat. How misbegotten his earlier foolish notions of thinking of her with pity as the victim of menacing Warholic, guessing one angel in another's hell. It was precisely the deficiencies of her imagination that, allowing her to cope, gave her precisely what she wanted to have. Her repeated projections about men bartering for her constituted more than a fantasy; it was behavior that she sought to put in motion. What about an eligibility paraphilia? Didn't she value bravado in others only because she herself was cowardly, admire danger and power simply because she was weak? No one is more reckless at a party than a diffident person in her sleep, and it seemed that anyone was acceptable to her as a sexual partner who was an outlaw or an outsider. And surely her wild allurement paraphilia was a taste whet by the separation of the rockers on stage from herself, a social and sexual inferior, at least in her adoring eyes, to be manipulated. No wonder Laura was unhappy. Ratnaster mentioned Saint Thomas Aquinas; was it not Aquinas who told us that *tristitia* is the most deleterious of all human passions? Laura's sadness actually angered Eyestones. Its meaning had a lot of despair in it, the sadness that leads to self-pity and hopelessness.

It is difficult to be a full person, but it is not more difficult to become

one by uncompromisingly choosing one's own life, pursuing one's own dreams, no matter how strange they may seem to someone else, than by attaching oneself to another. To assert one's self, quixotic though it may be, nourishes with far more force and makes a person more human. Droning is holding a single note for a long time.

"I've heard what you've been saying about me!" It was Laura Warholic in the doorway, screaming. She stood there. She kept standing there. She did not move. She simply stood and stared at them with an obsidian gaze.

Eugene Eyestones's face fell open. It was as if in some kind of unpredictable and unfathomable dark nightmare world, merely by walking over a bridge a person's darkest anxieties had suddenly turned into his worst fears and transmogrified into a troll, for while everybody gathered there in the pews sat with his mouth open, Laura with her parodyable face and vast ears big enough for echolocation was within mere seconds inexplicably standing there in the aisle of the church like an angry crane or avocet in the middle of a soda lake. No one could explain how she got there or found out about the service. A terrible silence held. She simply stood, fixed, for what seemed an interminable moment, almost rising, in a sensation, to a level of audacity, her hair as limp as bakery string. She began sputtering like a spit-sink, her face twisted in hate, her long pointed nose in her indignation coming to a nipple like a Cheyenne-style gun holster. And then without warning she took a step forward and pointing directly to the gathering there came out with a sharp, terrifying shriek that she shot-peened like a fission of hot metal as it echoed through the high nave, "*Shovel your shit somewhere else!*"

XLII
Ratnaster's Parable

"All men are terrified of events that violate their expectation," said Ratnaster, slamming on his hat and walking out of the chapel with Eyestones. He raised his coat collar against the cold rain, then fumbled for a cigarette and with an awkward series of hand-clicks lit it, puffed, and exhaled. His right hand spring-clacked with mechanical horror and fell stiffly back to his side in a ludicrous anti-salute. "I've seen it over and over again in the interviews I do with human sheep; usually the bigger the celebrity, the more astounding the moron. No, I agree that it's a cliché, but who ever expects to look up out of his bed to see sin come alive?" His hatred for both Warholics was immense and unnatural. He did not know gratitude but had a sense of obligation to Eyestones for that sum of money he had once offered him. He stood in the rain, hands crossed before his crotch, and his eyes—black, flat, and hard—were unblinking.

"I don't catch your drift," said Eyestones.

Ratnaster's pitted face, for the late afternoon, looked muddier for its coldness. As always, the dark shadows of his felt hat gave a sickening and devious look to his face in spite of his mirthless smile. The shadows of the city threw terrible angles across his bones. "It is not a drift. It is advice." "Good advice?" "All advice is bad." "For me?" "Let us say advice for someone who tries to appear cheerful when he is unhappy. You're involved."

He paused to lean forward.

"A man walking along a path who was being stalked by a panther suddenly heard the raised alarm—*rrack! rrack! rrack!*—of a huge black vulture. Once alerted by the bird, the fellow was able to run away, and, feeling grateful, blessing his luck, he hastened to a church in order to thank God for miraculously sending the intercessory bird his way to save him. He fell on his knees in deep and penitential gratitude. But anyone who understands not so much the mind-set of a bird of prey as the machinations of God should realize that the screeches of that mad creature were raised not to warn the man but rather to inform the panther where the prey had gone. The beast waited, guided by the noise, and pouncing killed the prechosen victim whose carcass he devoured, leaving the bones for the vulture to pick clean."

Without saying goodbye, Ratnaster only dragged his black artificial hand up—it clicked and locked—to flag a passing taxi, which pulled over. He stepped in and within seconds he was out of sight.

XLIII
Thanksgiving Dinner

Thanksgiving dinner together was only a figure of speech, for Laura, who appeared with yellow-tinted glasses and dyed-maroon hair pulled with a twist above her head in a Pebbles Flintstones topknot, was not so much preoccupied and indifferent to anything of worth they might have to discuss as manifesting cruel and vengeful behavior, an attitude that poisoned a day for which in the first place she had no regard, festive or ferial. She stood pausing in the doorway as usual, letting in cold air, maddeningly never ready for whatever reason to move to a discreet place. "I just saw that creepy dumb bastard out front in the all-red suit, Jesus! tugging this suitcase! 'Would the young miss be interested in owning the knowledge of the world?' he goes. I was fucking skeeved! Selling encyclopedias on Thanksgiving Day, can you believe that shit?"

"Mr. Harootootoonian," said Eugene. "He does not believe in holidays. No faith. No food. No festivities. No fooling around."

She entered the room with roaming eyes and took off her vinyl jacket. She was chewing gum and wearing a dark blue T-shirt and paisley slacks with a headachish pattern that were too short for her. Eugene asked if she were hungry, and she who usually ate like an oxpecker said that she was. He had tried to prepare what she liked. She liked broccoli and had other fussy vegetable proclivities. Guacamole she loved, along with burritos, and her adoration of quesadillas was always aligned to

a boast of her having traveled in Mexico and lived in San Francisco, where of course they tasted much, much better than any of those bogus ones made in Boston. She who could not creatively cut a potato in two had no qualms about boldly asking, always with an edge, "What are you cooking? What is that smell?" She had no pride but, in order to get along with her, expected you to overlook such things: anyone being critical of her, she felt, was only being cruel. Anger got you nowhere with her or, better, led to nothing. It was clear, ironically, that the more you plead with a person of low self-esteem, by some inexplicable kind of blame-shifting and reverse *scherzo*, the more she tends to loathe you. Intractability always fit her frown, and she was never more her father's daughter than when with an infuriated pseudo-anarchic thrill she was shoving "good-girl" behavior—like learning to cook, setting a table, saying grace, etc.—right back into society's face—"If I see any more of those dyed-in-the-wool Heathers in knee-socks having a diva fit in Harvard Square, I'll puke!" she often loudly bitched—and disobeying the laws of games and the grace of manners with angry rigor. Unbudgingness was her way of expressing her unsettling dissatisfactions with everything, most notably with etiquette. She refused to know, for example, that olive pits go into one's hand and onto the plate; that corn on the cob is buttered only a few rows at a time; that when a box of candy is offered to you, you take the filled paper cup as well as the candy; that, when entering a taxi, a man should go first and when exiting the woman should, etc.

Laura found all rules a personal affront. She had a brain hard as a dog's chew toy. She constantly spat on the shadow of passing Radcliffe women in their tams and Aran sweaters and well-cut Donegal tweed skirts whenever she had the chance, all those chiseled blondes with good cheekbones who in their pellucid prettiness all looked like Carole Lombard and Veronica Lake and beautiful Rosemary Ames who always played the gorgeous socialite whom Shirley Temple wanted to see married. It was so typically paradoxical of Laura who so disliked, so openly hated, Harvard students and well-born girls to turn around and then insist on imported beer, cognoscenti lettuce, basmati rice, and boutique salad dressings.

The holiday was a disaster. She transmitted such dire negativity that entire afternoon—had she got wind of Warholic's lawsuit?—that Eugene seriously began to wonder during the third or fourth assault on the stupidity of society and the savagery of men and the hypocrisy

of family life whether, despite her continuing and ongoing promiscuity, she wanted anything more to do with the human race. No resolve of hers had force, no reasoning any fortitude. A duck's quack does not echo. No one knows why.

What was her problem? Was it the legacy of her sexual familiar-and-fumbling father, Eugene wondered, that white-haired phantom in her life who probably looked like—and was a cross between—Little Bob Merkle the Popcorn Poppet and that preposterous neighbor of his, Mickey "Mouse" Mewlingshaw, that hack hoopoe of a writer with his Q-tip hair who in order to make sense of his own life spent year after year chasing down celebrities?

Once a father has neglected or disappointed his daughter, Eyestones realized, she develops steel teeth. Whereas once he thought that in the light of her seeing her father as a base betrayer, her faith was completely gone, it was actually an arrogance that had set in. Vanity is coldness. He believed she wanted a mate who, to win her heart, need only fly in the face of what her father, whenever he thought of his daughter, wanted for her. Laura had regressed to that same bat-eared, underweight, and pathetic stranger he saw the first day at the *Quink* office, grey, flat, featureless, and gloomy, like limbo. He had had her first intimations of her ending it all, hearing a certain rain-in-the-voice twang, when it became clear to him that she wanted to be with someone else that day—another man, of course—but sadly was not, a red, raddled, almost wavingly explicit confession that was revealed by a kind of bent, slovenly emotion of attitude that she could not hide, even by raising the timbre of her voice to a tone of disdain for one that could only be translated as desire for another. There was always someone she wanted by the constant need she had of fleeing herself. The dissembling mask she put on was a kind of face. It was something, to a lesser degree, quoted in his own thoughts for Rapunzel, thought Eyestones. It was as if in looking for an identity beyond each other, both needed to have it verified by the very person he and she least wanted involved in the confirmation. Or was he misjudging her unfairly? Does not the seeing eye perversely reverse light and shadow instead of properly appraising them as the telescope does? Are not many apples probably blue, having taken blue from the spectrum, but the eye taking up the rejected red, "sees" the apple as red? Half the time he would be looking at Laura but seeing as Rapunzel, feeling of Rapunzel what he was touching of Laura, never knowing which was a mask

and what was a face. In a brief interval, while Eugene gave her a plate of hors d'oeuvres and went downstairs to let out his cat Nook, Laura, checking to be sure that he was out of sight, grabbed the telephone and quickly dialed a Cambridge number to try to get in touch with a secret someone, but no one answered and her only connection was to an answering-machine playing a snippet of the pretentious electronic music of Aphex Twin. She became instantly jealous. How sad on this holiday that she—

"Would you like a drink?"

"Got any beer?"

"Let me check," he said.

"Bud or imported?" she swanned. "Like I say—"

"—*as* I say."

"*As* I say, I can't stand American beer, especially when I'm drinking with—" and here Laura intentionally lilted her voice with the kind of flirtatiousness she often employed that had the edge of sarcasm—"friends." It made him immediately miss Rapunzel. *Two loves I have, of comfort and despair*, he thought, quoting a friend. Doctor my eyes. As he did not have what she wanted, she asked him to give her a glass of wine.

Laura poked an hors d'oeuvre. She moved restlessly around the room. She walked to the counter, picked up a tin from the shelf, and smelled it. "Colman's mustard," said Eugene. "A tried and true product. Used by Ernest Shackleton in the 1907-1909 British Antarctic Expedition. Twenty-eight pounds of it, to be exact. They loved it."

"Who?"

"It went well with pemmican fat. 'Good hoosh,' as they said."

He handed her a glass of wine.

"But according to you, you're always alone," he said, toasting her. He did not think she had the emotional muscle to stop lying. "Right?"

He recalled that Nancy Drew once said that the only thing one needed to solve a mystery is an inquisitive mind and two good friends. He had the inquisitive mind. As to the two good friends, they were there, too. The question was, who was the other one? Her option to tell a lie or the chance to tell the truth. But she dodged the question.

"Not always, but—"

"By 'not always' we mean—?"

"We?"

"You."

She had a habit of acting with her neck. "I'm not . . . well," she said. She was nervous, shifty-eyed, pompous, and evasive, and answered Eugene's questions with such rapid, half-swallowed utterances that he could barely understand her. She never stopped to verify whether he understood her. Lying produces its own weather. Concealment is the last form of resistance.

Her lies of juggling omission—"Yes, I didn't," "No, I did"—made that small face, that forensic face, framed in big hair, always eerie in the continuing contradiction, the living paradox, of being that of an utter stranger who is totally familiar. The long nose that went with that pair of brown oblique eyes lengthened over her thin lips and jutting chin, imparting a touch of militancy to them, something of a fierce and unappeasable nature. The way of peace is the way of truth, Eugene chose to decide. Truthfulness is even more important than peacefulness, the only thing to build on; indeed, he thought, if anything, lying is the mother of violence. Every lie is a broken promise, and oddly enough in the very lie, he realized, the promise is made and broken at the very *same moment.* Who was she sleeping with now?

"I've grown fond of you, Poppin' Fresh," said Laura, smiling at the non-sequitur as she turned toward a small bowl of fruit to revolve an apple.

"'The burdock with its crooked pykes,'" quoted Eugene, setting out the food.

"Come again?"

Nonsense on stilts, he thought. "Nothing." *You play the phonola, I'll play the sackbut.*

Looking sideways, she seemed to be listening to herself and assaying its worth. The onrushing sense of guilt compounded her deceit into aggression. She jerked her head toward him. "Are you grilling me?"

"I am trying to talk to you." But he wondered: am I really engaged in Mutruxism, seeing her again and again in order by a series of reinforcing premises to prove her valueless, a cheat, a liar, and so feel less guilty for deserting her? He harbored such renegade thoughts about himself. He recalled sometimes perversely dwelling on how he would be back in Vietnam so he could wish he was back home again. He did not expect a mad *ginga* from her or a juke of whirling delight, merely someone to share a pleasant hour or two. How often had he mistaken a merely delectable good for a perfective one. And yet always in

Laura's case he had felt neither one.

"Do you have to stand there?"

"Where?" she asked.

"Behind me. It bothers me." He turned toward her. "You say you're not well?"

"That's what I said," she snapped, indifferently catching the echoes of her own negativity. "I found out I have to get a ball of wax removed from my ear. Wax build-up. There's more of it forming in there."

"You have no insurance. Go to the Boston City Hospital, OK? They'll take you."

"I thought I'd try to go through the American Red Cross. Someone told me—"

"Don't. They'll charge you. Anyway, it's a corrupt organization and without conscience. Don't support them. They still fund animal experiments. I don't believe they'll help you anyway. They charge for blood."

"How do you know?"

"I know, I know, that's all. Can't you ever believe me? Ever hear of the PCRM? Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine?" he asked, touching her. Her hand was as cool as a stone. He looked into but through her faraway eyes that seemed so devoid of fire. Had he a confirmation bias against her, he wondered, some kind of sniping, flagrant refusal to accept that anything on her part would ever change, a conviction her mulishness, born perhaps of her feeling the same of him, would only repeat, had so often repeated? He felt she did not care, for him or for anything or for anyone, but wanted to disbelieve it "There's a way of being awake, Laura. You know? Now, I'll take you to the hospital when you decide to go."

" How? I never see you these days anyway," said Laura, looking doubtful. "You're never around when I need you."

He smiled. "You never need me when I'm around."

Both had seen *Kiss Me Deadly* endless times.

"Here," he said, holding a chair for her. "Let's sit down for dinner."

He had cooked a large chicken—for her alone. The papery drive of what hours with her could be, never mind days, he well knew, but by the time they sat down at the table, with her slouched in her chair, seemingly perched as if to leave, and dressed in clothes as foreign to current taste as firmament to fin and that smell of anger along with

the rank reek of her paraphilias as pronounced as the faint alkaline odor of her body, Laura began repeating stories for some reason, while indifferently tapping her food with a fork, not only again about her own sad, dysfunctional family whom she complained never celebrated holidays and never made much of a thing about togetherness—it remained, all of it, strictly anecdotal, there was no proof—but also by an extension known only to herself about the wake of a dead uncle, when she lugubriously put both of her hands in her pockets and emptily remarked, "It's awful to be confronted with a corpse when you have no faith."

"That's sad."

"But you're a good Christian, aren't you? Close to God, no? Just blessed in everything you do, unlike the rest of us, right?" Laura asked sarcastically, taking up the topic to follow the logic du jour. "Like my friend Gayle Bagle in San Francisco who, even though she has no marketable skills, still managed to tidily arrange everything by marrying someone who would take care of her for the rest of her life. Like a total loser." She snapped her gum. "Which naturally my parents hoped was going to be my fate, like I mean get real, when that was *so* not going to happen." She snapped her gum again. "House, screeching brats, another kid due. To me she's living a lie. 'Why, Gayle, you little devil. You've gone and bought yourself some new kitchen curtains!'" she mimicked. "'They're simply heaven! And that shine on those drinking glasses? What gloss! Why, they're crystal! How do you do it all?' That's not a lie? Stuck in a loveless marriage, trading freedom, love, and sexual pleasure for security? Forcing yourself to have to fuck your husband once a week? Being economically dependent on men?" Laura glumly prodded a potato with her fork. "She's a puppet performing in a play. A Stepford wife. A cop-out artist sponging off her in-laws by living in their house with dogs and a set of martini glasses and a back porch with a hibachi. Oh no, that's not weak, right? I could call her a prostitute or a maid and not be far off the mark."

"You mean for her fears she never reached 'escape velocity'?" asked Eugene, "and only sank into the morass of her own self?" He offered Laura a bowl of broccoli. *But what do you do with yourself?*

Laura pulled out her gum, put it in a napkin, and sipped her wine. The talker is by definition not a listener. Eugene, who had an orthophotomap of her soul, was amazed that, typically, in going on at such length about her foxhole friend she completely failed to see that

she was speaking about herself, so blinded was she by consuming envy and the hatred of what she was, concluding falsely in her nonchalant but unrenunciating and authentic bitterness that by the act of looking through a window she herself could be seen.

"When you get angry at a particular person," asked Eugene, trying to lighten things, "why not try writing his or her name on a piece of paper as a response and putting that piece of paper in your shoe to walk on?"

"What kind of nut did that?"

"Adele Astaire."

"Who's that?"

"A dancer. But it doesn't matter. It was simply her way of getting clear of a problem." He poured some more wine and moving a dish toward her said, "Try the broccoli."

"No."

"What about the quesadillas? I made them for you."

She pointed. "What's that?"

"Succotash."

"No, that."

"Stuffed acorn squash. I tried to cook a meal for you that they would have eaten in the thirteen original colonies. Plum pudding with brandy butter. Cranberries." He laughed. "With a few creative additions. I cooked chicken for you special. I know you like quesadillas."

"The great chef."

Was he blind *still*? His meal was not much. He felt bad. Discknickers was right. The absurdity of poverty is its only palliative. What was it that Juvenal had said, "The worst thing about poverty is that it makes men ridiculous"? Did his deference annoy her so? She made it seem so smug of him to find humility in what abandoning he ignored.

"Look, nobody's boasting here," Eugene said, trying to present the plates. "I only thought you were hungry."

"Kind of obvious not."

"Don't you like chicken?

Laura flung back her hair. She seemed not to hear him, merely let her belittling remarks hang in the air as she abstractedly sipped her wine. A fog is only a cloud at ground level, he reflected wistfully. What was the point of arguing? Chasuble was right about her. A little inaccuracy saves a lot of explanation, with her half-truths, like her excuses to him, being probably interchangeable. There is that thing about half-

truths in the first place. They are always half-lies.

It didn't matter. He raised his glass and, quietly toasting Laura, declared, "'Give my love to the sunrise.' Rita Hayworth, *Lady of Shanghai*."

A friend, a prostitute. Eugene, who always disliked Laura's facile disloyalty to anyone absent whom she chose to run down, greatly suspected that in turn she no doubt spoke ill of him to others. It crossed his mind as he watched her that Seneca in his tragedies had seen the truth: a woman either loves or hates, there is no third category. Why was it when he and Laura put their heads together that they never saw the same reality? How was it that she could be so desperate and yet never really serious? Why was she always managing the facts to foreshadow her later choices and to defend herself by way of delayed revelation? What all along she failed to see, he knew, was that he knew her as well as she did him. On the other hand, what was maddeningly missing of limpid simplicity in such a non-intricate, obvious person on this Thanksgiving?

He wished that Harriet Trombone had come for dinner instead of Miss Laura Warholic. She was her own person. She owned herself who knew, unlike Laura, that nothing is truly ours that another may deprive us of. He had invited her the year before, but she was proud and insisted that she did not believe in the contrived feast of Thanksgiving, indignantly asking, as she cited the open-ended and cruel five-century-long obscenity of thievery and wholesale genocide by white Europeans of native Americans from Patagonia to Mexico to all of North America and Greenland, who the hell was giving thanks for what? "I happen to be going to the Chocolate Quarter to be with my own people," said Harriet. "That OK with you, Whitey?" When she asked him who he would be with on that day and he told her, with a sarcastic yoop she gave him warning, referencing her ability as a Bajan to see into the future, that she smelled nothing but treachery. Eyestones knew in relation to her fears and suspicions how bad it could be in the ghetto. She was candid, and he listened. In true humility, she used no disguises and was frank about the compromises she had to make. Craft must have clothes, thought Eugene, but truth prefers to go naked. He secretly knew she rarely could afford meat. He thought sadly of Harriet's having to follow sales in order to save money and having to trudge for miles to shop with clipped coupons, unless he drove her somewhere else, at the inexpensive Sav-A-Lot or the Farmer's Market in Mattapan

for day-old bread and dented cans and bruised vegetables. Still, he felt bad for Laura, as well, and pitied her, for her poverty of spirit, her poverty of matter. Duxbak's words echoed back to him: *Poverty needs help, poverty needs help.*

Eugene handed Laura a plate of meat and stuffing. She took it but seemed unreachable. Her eyes had taken on that glazed gaze between boredom and boldness, a dazed, unavailable, forlorn state of acceptance he had seen so often. Her lack of commitment made her little more than present. She sat there stiff, formal, unimaginative. In this instance, it was odd, she did not even sniff her plate.

"You're not eating?"

"No."

No thanks.

"You won't even try it?"

She looked at her watch. "I'm not hungry."

"Have some more wine."

"No."

"Take twenty grains—that's a scruple."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Her responses were pinched.

"I'm only reminded of all the gruesome things you ate with relish out West when we were traveling, all those funnel cakes and Piggypops and Ding Dongs. So why not—"

"I've lost my appetite."

"On Thanksgiving?"

"I ate a large breakfast at the Brookline Lunch."

"I cooked this for you, Laura."

She shrugged and snapped a celery. "I'm impressed, but a favor doesn't create a debt."

"I even made a loaf of bread for you." She lifted a slice and dropped it. "Standard Ezekiel 4:9," he said, laughing, "but *not* cooked in either human waste or cow dung."

"Meaning?"

"It's not important."

She went cross-eyed like was crazy.

"Chicken is, or at least was, the most expensive meat in Vietnam. In rural areas chicken is served only on special occasions. If you are served chicken—*thit gà*—it means that you're a special guest. '*Cár ây rât đắt*,' I used to tell my girlfriend Tuyet—as I told you, the name means

'snow'—'*Giá rât cao.*' The price is very high. That's very expensive. *Tôn quâ.* 'It costs a lot.'" Eyestones realized he probably should not have mentioned Snow's name to Laura, and he had not intended to do so. Superstitiously, he almost never referred to her. Now he did. Was it a mistake? He didn't want to argue. He felt he had to be careful, sit on his hands lest he make an incident worse, for an accident is always a series of incidents. But what did it matter anymore? Wasn't he himself simply showing more ass-kissing Tobot-the-Boyfriend-Robot behavior? Wasn't he once again in trying to be peaceful in his most agitated mood creating for that pale reproachful face in front of him an anti-self, specifying the qualities he lacked in order to acquire them? Why not end it here? Shouldn't he have recognized in all his failures with Laura that repetitive moments—like Beethoven's who even in the finale of the Fifth Symphony wrote too many C chords—tell us that too many endings in a sense constitute none? He felt a comfort in the memory and smiled. "This was in Kwan Province. She used to make me *canh ga chien bo*: chicken wings fried in butter." Laura visibly bristled. But he paid no mind. He didn't care. His hands shaped space. "Served on moist green leaves. We also ate dandelions. Small delicate ones." He looked past the room, the city, the country, the intervening sea, the horizon. A beautiful girl with black-cherry hair in a white bao-dai blew him a kiss. "There wasn't much to eat. For anybody."

"What was she, a bar girl?"

"She was a carpenter."

"She was more than enough, I'm sure."

"She's dead."

"Not in your memory, Peach Pie," said Laura, critically inspecting the design on her spoon. "You still love her, right? You think about her, don't you?" As usual, she bit off her words in questioning him as if she wished he would get to the point. Eugene took off his eyeglasses, rested his thumbs in his eye sockets, and sighed. He thought once again of the riddle: What hovers in the air like butterflies and croaks under foot like frogs? But he said nothing. "A babe ingénue, your type," said Laura, sneering. "It's all right. But I mean, like, I mean why not come out and fucking say so?"

"Dandelions are in the chicory family. Or endive. *Cicoria* in Italian. Bitter, delicious."

Laura looked disgusted.

"Horace ate them. The Roman poet, you know? They're tasty as

a simple salad with only vinegar and oil. '*Me pascunt olivae / Me cichorea levesque malvae.*' I memorized it in high

school. It's from ode thirty-one and called 'The Poet's Prayer.'" He began to quote, "'*Quid dedicatum pascit Apollinem / Vates? Quid orat*—'"

"Oh please," she groaned.

"Try some of this," said Eugene, setting down a bowl of soup.

"What is it?"

"P-h-o. Fah."

"Pho?"

He nodded. "But pronounced *fah*."

"You're being pedantic."

Fight with yourself, fishswiveler.

"It's beef broth infused with ginger, star anise, cinnamon, and rice stick noodles."

Laura only sat there looking at him again with that stupid open-eyed lack of cooperation. Her tendency to mope never abated, the discontent she felt seeping silently into the air. She showed that twenty-past-eight mouth of Bette Davis and even her poached eyes. It was her mouth, perhaps more than anything, that always signaled which Laura you were getting. Instant Boredom, just add water.

"The food. It looks too mysterious, does it?" He looked at the table of good food and thought of the C-rations of lima beans and ham grunts used to call "beans and motherfuckers" he once had to eat. He began to laugh. "Saint Augustine accused the heretical Manicheans of actually sprinkling their Eucharistic bread with semen for flagitious purposes—to purge the divine substance from it."

"I can't believe you're talking like this to me."

"Please, eat."

She sneered, "The Sexual Intellectual."

It was part of her self-hatred to rely on such key-cold rebukes. "I thought you were the one who was offering sexual theories, in defense of your . . . your San Francisco friend there. You know, the 'prostitute.'"

"Everybody's a prostitute!"

Eugene was trying to be patient with her. Artists don't paint objects; they paint strokes. And of all days he badly wanted to try to understand.

"You once complained about me going from one man to another. All that horseback advice of yours," she said, leaning forward, point-

ing her spoon at him earnestly. "Did it ever occur to you that women may need to do that kind of thing to survive?" asked Laura, waving and gesturing as if she were splashing out a Pollock. "To cope? To get by? To manage things? If you're not in the workforce, or working some piddly job, it's natural to seek a benefactor, isn't it? A patron? A guy who can help you out? I mean, like why not? Your lover or your so-called hubby becomes the 'boss' who pays your way. Wasn't that what your cute little Snowball, the squint, was doing back there in Vietnam? You seem to know lots of women. How about that *'Que besa su pies'* valentine?"

"You're joking," Eugene said.

"Or Harriet Trombone? Or that bitch Creedmore at the diner? I've seen her. Gumpsville city! Then what about that cute Russian dental hygienist over at the Forsyth you were always talking about? Did you tell them that you live in the past? That you speed-talk like a coke addict? That you are always going on and on about 'eyes fitted to see truth' but never do? That you are the most impatient man in the world? That you require immediate answers and demand total loyalty and stutter and use the word *insouciance* in every conversation? That you cannot abide anyone standing behind you? That you read the Bible like a recipe book? Did you also tell them that you write sexist articles, probably have 'Nam syndrome, and prefer cats to people? That you actually howl and yell at God—*at God!*—throwing up your window to look up at the fucking sky *in order to do so?* That you're a logic-batterer who believes that everybody who is not dedicated full-time to seeking the meaning of life is leading a pointless and inauthentic existence? That you believe the subjects of sex and love are the best way to scrutinize the nature of men and women and their strangeness? That you despise people like police and judges and disdain all authority? That you're a half-crazed, totally-obsessed, neatness-junkie and have to have everything in its place and in order?" Laura jerked her head forward in furious accusation. "Did you ever happen to share with them any of your spellbinding theories that from thwarted loves and misery and betrayed dreams and broken or unfulfilled romantic hopes lessons can be learned? That you can study people's hearts? That you once wasted an entire two days on a trip across the USA driving all the way to the Oakland Memorial Gardens in Fishers, Indiana, just to see the grave of that actress Frances Farmer? That you worship the late Queen of Jordan?"

"Calm down," Eugene pleaded, seeing her gaunt face turning into a feuilletage of pale fury while spitting her misery in elevating screams.

"Did you tell them that you insist, by folding it in fours, there is only one way of reading a newspaper on the T? That you can't stand dawdling or, like, people perusing menus and insist that people should know what they want and never delay and immediately order and never hold up a waitress? That you avoid humans, eat one meal a day, and feed your plants with a turkey baster? That you never play your violin but would swim across the goddamn Great Lakes in a hurricane for a 78 rpm record by some syphilitic coon recorded from way back in 1925? That you think all American car horns beep in the key of F? That you figure out the temperature by doing quadratic equations? That you're unpredictable and hold grudges? That for example you never again looked at a Gary Cooper movie after discovering that he was stupid and read about one book in his whole life and refuse to watch the movie *Since You Went Away* or any of her other movies after finding out that Jennifer Jones, betraying him, deserted her husband, Robert Walker, to marry fat, rich, ugly David O. Selznick for the wealth and fame he gave her? That you think people with lower back problems don't feel supported and that people have bladder infections because they're pissed off and that people catch colds because they're overwhelmed? That you think everything is *staged,* on TV, on the news, all reports, remarks, and reactions? That you think inviting more than eight people to a sit-down affair is barbaric because you can't talk? All your theories! Cold sinks! Bridges freeze first! Birch tree syrup is better than maple! Did you tell them that you would rather talk about crows than fuck? That you never married because some freakazoidal uncle of yours who was an ordained Carmelite priest mocked your bedwetting when you were little and said you would pee on your wife and that you never, never forgot this? That you believe all those states in this country with an *o* in them are filled with hicks and hayseeds? That you write poems about making donuts? That you get visibly upset and angry when Woody Allen in his movies so casually abuses the name of Jesus? That you have favorite religious hymns that you insist on hearing like 'Jerusalem Kafoozalem' and 'Come, Dripping Founts of Water Down by the Riverside' or some such shit? That you believe in anatomical predestination? That you have more fucking theories about life and living than any human since Jesus was a corporal in the Salvation Army?"

She was plugged in and ranting with the authority of Phoebe, the deaconess of Cenchrea, breathing in quick yoops as she continued, the *voussoir* of her nose raised in hauteur. He felt humiliated and his eyes ached and he wished for his black cellulose goggles. Her strident voice had the irritating rattling sound of the sharp report of a whistle, and he began to wonder if she had a cork speed-pea in her throat!

"Did you tell them that you dislike people? That you don't even fucking *believe* in democracy? That you think being waited on in a restaurant is counterrevolutionary? That you spend whole days in a booth at Totaljew's reading? That you still use typewriters and do your own laundry and are always staring at constellations in the sky and are convinced that all traffic jams are caused by cops? That you have eyes requiring about eighteen or something diopters of correction but also think it's your privilege to read everybody else's secrets? That you wept at Gettysburg when standing in the Peach Orchard or the Apple Orchard or whatever? That you despise computers and cellphones and email and even ringing telephones, the 'loud crake of that black shoe,' as you intolerantly call it? That you hate loud footsteps but at the same time hate to have someone sneak up on you? That you're unshaven half the time and always insist on answers right away and wash dishes in cold water?" She paused to take an intertitling breath. "Did you tell them that you consider it vain to brush your teeth with open eyes while looking in the mirror? That in your sexist, mythological fantasies women in the lofty need of motherhood biologically resist creativity only to become the fools of nature and pawns of fate like idiotic fucking goo-goo dolls? That couples after years of marriage begin to look alike? That you always come down on people who first use the word *well* in every response and broom poor ungrammatical slobs like those supermarket people who wrote '10 items or less' when it should be '10 items or fewer'? That you keep a perpetual shrine in the your brain for Marilyn Monroe and Betsy Drake and Eleanor Powell and some dead chink you knew in Southeast Asia about two hundred years ago? Did you tell any of them that you went ferret-sneaking around with cheap Mexican whores in Cuernavaca and like all the phony guys and fabrikoid fucks I ever knew would have screwed my girlfriend Weezie and bonked Gayle Bagle and tried to fuck around with Twelve and her transparent panties? That you choose the road of silence in arguments to avoid the kind of escalation you with your big goddam ego always insist confirms the basic incompatibility of all couples, *all couples*,

ALL COUPLES?"

Laura was actually braying now. Her small, white, set face became sharper as she began irrigating the trench of memory. Was this outburst the result of his simply telling her, for her own sake, he wondered, that trees kept growing as long as they live, that they never stop growing, that only the death of a tree halts its growing process?

"And what about Kate what's-her-face, your typist? You don't have to lie about it. Did you ever tell her about me? I mean, in the sense of my being with you? Are you still remaining friends with her? Call her?" She fired a finger at him. "No, it's not me. It's *you* who are bogus! Not me, YOU! You . . . you win the Freixenet Award!"

Synth fanfare. A cavatina of power chords. Big finish.

It was all true. Eugene was waiting it out, with aching eyes. He only replied, "I find it difficult to talk in circles."

The large flags of her ears seemed to wag as if waiting to hear with anticipation what further questions she was ready to pose as, out of breath, she was listening for her own answers. "So it is natural to seek a benefactor, isn't it? I mean, like why not? I prefer a human being. I don't buy the God bit and all the complicated bullshit about original sin, for your information. I may be a half-wit, but at least I choose to *think*. That's what you've always wanted me to do, right? What we're not supposed to have thought, God did not tell us, so we're supposed to find out for ourselves, is the way I see it. God supposedly knows everything. One thing he does not know, though, is whether we'll guess what he is not supposed to think. So since there is no pill for us to take to make us clever, God's grumpy veto against evil human thoughts went bust because some just said fuck it, went ahead, had evil thoughts, and became clever. I may not be one of them, Mr. Ace-in-the-Hole, but I wanna be! Can you grock that?" She seemed now if intelligent still angry, and he wondered if all her wrath were not at bottom self-hatred. Eugene closed his eyes. He had often felt the same about himself in relation to Laura by way of Rapunzel. Could she not see that she allowed herself to be deceived because she *herself* deceived? But it was true, the person who listens hard by definition does not see. "You don't agree, I can tell. So?"

He also had to remember: she hated him, the way one always hates someone she has to depend on so badly and so often. He felt pity for that, which, paradoxically, was only an aspect of the misery of love.

But he was thinking of Snow. In all his years of knowing her, in the

merciless jungle heat, in the Mekong Delta in July, when it rained so hard at times your head thundered, in the mud and sorrow, they never once had an argument. He used to wonder why. Now he knew. She could understand nine sides of every situation, every dilemma, having seen and experienced suffering from her earliest years. She who was slightly deaf from a bout of meningitis at the age of two had grown up penniless on Tin Street in Hanoi and at thirteen shook smoldering incense sticks before a huge gilded Buddha when her parents were killed. She lived on Silk Street—*Hang Thao*—and worked in a pho shop from 7 A.M. to 1 P.M. for years, trucking to and from the market at pre-dawn hours with her carrying-pole balancing vegetables on her small shoulders. She wore delicate red earrings like the flowers of columbine and her sweet kisses had the violet-jellybean taste of *crême d'yvette*. She learned to face death and handle trouble with bravery and grace, knowing what to let fall away and what to embrace. Wasn't understanding ultimately a point of view? And compassion love?

Her father had taught her martial arts. She knew Tae Kwon Do, had taken wushu classes, and could do a spinning 360-degree tornado bird-kick, a butterfly-twist heel-kick, followed by an upside-down aerial flip with a vicious palm strike to the groin like a perfect propeller. Yet she hated violence and never talked about it. She had been raised in a convent and said she was forced to use her arts only one time when she was a young girl and she had been mistakenly locked out and had almost been raped.

She had almond-shaped eyes and her skin was cool and flawless, with hair like a sleek dark waterfall. She claimed that the beauty of her hair was due to a pepper diet. Her voice was soft and reassuring, never rising in anger, and in the throes of passion she who was as fragrant as a mistelle never made more than a tiny moan like a dovecall. She who walked with perfect custody of the eyes and with selfless sweetness found peace within herself, and her laughter was released like flocks of birds from her heart. She was shocked at Western manners. She would not kiss in public, never passed things with one hand only—extremely polite Vietnamese always use two—and could scarcely believe that we in the West ate with kitchen implements instead of chopsticks and that in mixed company we opened presents in front of the giver, after which we rudely kept saying "Thank you, thank you" to shrug off obligation. She was shocked at how Americans overate and boasted and spoke loudly and always crowed about their country being number one and

refused to queue in line and so often thoughtlessly stood in front of one another without stepping aside or gracefully yielding. She used to wave hello endearingly by extending her flat palm face-out at the end of her wrist, flapping her hand left and right, right and left, with her arm turning back and forth as if on an axis. He recalled writing her love letters on an old bright-red Olivetti "Valentine" typewriter made in Barcelona that he had long since lost and singing "*Parlami d'amore Maria*" to her one night on top of a mountain to her soft laughter and teaching her English under a tarpaulin hooch with an M-60 in his lap (she would always deprecatingly tap her forehead with two fingers and say, "*Khouna biet, khouna biet*": "I don't know, I don't know"). One morning the two of them found an abandoned old black Soviet Volga and drove it everywhere together whenever he had a day off. It eventually blew up, to their fits of laughter. He remembered being in love and waking up with her to share noodle soup with rice liquor for breakfast and how for one month they then drove around the countryside on a 1969 BSA 441 Victor (a "441 Victim") with an elegant alloy-and-yellow tank, a classic big single with a great-looking pipe and muffler, driving more than once through a cloud of shit bombs, mortars, Thermit grenades, Foo-gas, the sound of M-79s, and even RPGs coming in. Eugene looked sadly over to the shelf where sat the snow-globe that played the theme from *Carousel*. It had been Snow's. He had found it in an old jumble shop in Saigon and gave it to her the first night that he met her. It was in the end the only keepsake he now had of Snow. She, who when he gave her a hug or a kiss or a flower or a ribbon or a tortoiseshell comb, always gently, ritually, took off his eyeglasses with her delicate fingers in order to kiss his face, his eyes, had the soul of compassion.

She was as pure as snow on a convent roof.

She was self-reliant.

Most of all, Snow was brave.

In her thin linens and broken dreams and scoured and ruined country, she was nothing if not good and compassionate and strong. And ever so brave.

Eugene had now lost his own appetite. Poor Snow. An orphan at eleven, she was never strong, and eventually somewhere outside the town of Bên Cat she became ill with thalassemia major, a genetic blood disease in which red blood cells are not capable of carrying oxygen through the body. He remembered going half out of his mind

from grief and weeping for weeks for her. He became as grief-stricken for her as she had been for him when, finding him ill, she had cut off a chunk of her hair out of some need for expiation and buried it under a tree. Soon she had grown pale and become terribly enervated. Wasting away. Pencil thin. Nothing could be done. With a bribe that he made, she was raced into Saigon on a "six-by" with wooden slats to the dilapidated Hung Dao Hotel, a three-story flea-trap in the middle of Hung Dao Street in the city, a brothel, really, whose grubby first-floor had been converted into a hospital with about ten of fifteen beds.

That became a truth for him. A state of grace could be reached by anyone. The most important thing, he saw, was to be nothing, absolutely nothing. It became a transcendental blessing. Unable to tolerate the light, they stayed in the darkened room. His eyes were killing him, and to find some relief he dilated his pupils with atropine. He stayed with Snow to the end, running errands on a wounded leg—his thigh ached in the dampness—to the Tu Do Street area, a combat zone in itself, to get bags of pot to try to ease her pain. In their remoteness, it was so lonely, so dark, her illness so pointless, so unatonably odious in which all the maxims of a God of hope seemed so trodden underfoot that he himself was becoming unstrung. During the final days, she asked him not to miss her lest he become crippled by sadness. It was a full moonlit night. His lips had formed a last goodbye, but if he had said anything he did not hear a single sound for the white noise of this strange thing happening that he could not quite believe. His voice disappeared into his throat. Her very last words to him as she passed away in his arms were, "Happiness is wanting to be nobody."

"I understand the need to survive, Laura. The desperation behind that need." He paused. "And the required behavior behind that desperation," said Eugene, unable to eat, lost in the midst of a plurimillennial dream which he had by now lost the certainty had ever existed. Consequences, almost all of them, become insignificant. The longer we live, he realized, the more we realize we deserve to die. When Snow died, he found himself for the longest time being irked that anyone was late. He also became fearful of loud noises, any obligation to meet people, impatient with late-night telephone calls, sudden changes of plans, sirens, any sky noise from helicopters or planes, and he could not stop a nervous habit of actually wringing his hands, cleansing motions, that stayed with him for several years. "I only think it's wrong to—"

She blurted out, "To what?"

He tried to speak.

"*To what?*"

Eugene was trying to bleed all agression from his voice. "To lie to each other. I understand the nature of our friendship. But you shouldn't continue coming by here trying to keep up the charade of pretending to love me while—"

"While what?"

"Going out."

"Going out?"

"With others."

She blushed angrily, her cheek taking on burning red glow of a high Tibetan's.

"With others?"

"You heard me."

She swallowed.

"When?"

"What does it matter?"

"Where?"

"To the movies."

Your witness, Mr. Mason.

Certain questions answer themselves merely by being asked. Laura turned scarlet, blushing. *How did he find out?* she wondered. Her eyes narrowed in disapproval, and she caught her lower lip in her teeth and worked it as if pondering a single question she was afraid to ask. Her tongue curled up like a question mark but she refused to answer, temporizing as a form of inquiry. To tell him the truth was to lose. She ordinarily would have boasted, but he was ahead of her. It was an absolute law of military operations: the inevitably of the unexpected. He smiled and said, "You're a strange person."

She did a Felix-the-Cat clock with her eyes.

Eugene waited.

She feigned curiosity. "Why?"

"'All twiske-tee betwisk,' as Queequeg said of his bent harpoons in *Moby-Dick*."

Gravity increases with distance, according to Newton's Law of Inertia. If the tendency of a moving object was to continue moving in a straight line unless something influences it and moves it out of its path, Eugene figured, he had not only failed to help Laura, it was worse. If she'd become ponderous and inaccessible by increasing re-

moves, then after this body-blow she was now utterly spooked.

"Are you being, um—economical with the truth?"

"I don't go out with others," she said.

It was the left side of her face talking. The human body is actually two halves; *not* similar. There is actually a left and right side of a face. A bifurcation is a double deal. We are split down the middle.

"You should really learn to be honest," he replied, swallowing angrily. "Don't you even believe that?"

She sulked. "Maybe once. I don't *know*."

"'Every Maybe has a wife. Wife called Maybe-not,' said Charlie Chan."

"I might have gone to a rock concert. You'd never go with me. Ever notice?"

He paused. Three, it came to him once again, the prime number of myth. But they were yoked together, like oxen. Wasn't a pair of bellows just one piece? She was by way of doubt his anti-Rapunzel, and in her dissembling literally re-minded him, for everything she did spoke for the present, with guile, on cue, of convenience, in secret, at once, and only upon being asked. He was tired of it all.

Three, a third, triad.

"Have you met someone?"

"*What?*"

"A new person. Just tell me."

She shook her head, but said nothing, only gave him an Anatolian smile, the smile that hides resentment, and shrugged.

A psychogyn's shrug is the crossword puzzle of body language, he realized. She was always just slightly below the resolving power of the eye, but he had seen what he needed. No tongs required. The art of cross-examination is not the art of examining crossly. *I declare this stone well and truly laid*, as the Queen of England would say. It was hot in the room. His eyes hurt.

"There's nothing I want to hear at a rock concert," said Eugene, who sat with his back to the wall as was his habit, Doc Holliday-style, "and virtually no one I want to see at a rock concert. It's like watching painters paint. At least to me. It's one definition of hell, to tell the truth. Close to unbearable. Squeezed in. Arms waving. Deafening noise. Crowd clichés. I prefer records."

She now sat slouching at the table with slacker indifference, typically sitting sideways, carelessly forking the meat and dropping bits on

the floor. It was her custom never to finish eating the food on her plate, which she knew aggravated Eyestones, and so with dumb cluck intent and like a spoiled child she made it a habit from the first and thereafter constantly to do so, defying him to dislike it, only another ludicrous coping mechanism, at least in her mind, to assert her independence. The attitude she assumed on holiday occasions had a grammar all its own. No reason. No ecstasy. No joy. No enthusiasm. No vision. No understanding. He felt sorry for her. She was a poor pathetic mudhen who only deserved pity. She was mannerless and did not have a clue. Her selfishness had often brought out his worse side but as Laura just sat there, white-faced, spindly and dithery, her low forehead drawn in a metropic sulk, the hairy guiches in front of her ears, her pointed sideburns, giving her the sulking look of a gunsel in a bad noir movie, he who usually felt sorry for her now began badly to resent her. It was more the lies than anything else. Laura failed to see it was like the old Jimmy Durante joke, when the cop asked him, "Where are you going with that elephant?" and he replied, "What elephant?" Laura Warholic minus comic relief equaled kitsch. Wearing her magenta hair up like an Indian bison, its brown roots showing, made her seem elongated and risk-prone and truant.

Petulance is an aspect of unkindness. When Eugene first met her he noticed she banged doors, bought coffee only for herself, left lights burning, shared nothing, wrote to no one, treated waitresses in restaurants like whores, rudely asking for a thing without a please and taking it without a thank you. She had no sense of dignity, so slid along the wall, as it were, giving herself away as worthless. One late summer afternoon she and Eugene had been watering a few outdoor plants when, looking up, she suddenly noticed a neighbor looking at them, and pivoting like a scullion she blushed with shame—losers never belong—and whispered, "He's staring at us." But who was really staring? It was only another example of how personal style exists as a natural appendage of character. He only saw Egon Schiele's standing female, *Nude with Crossed Arms*, a true refrigerant, grotesquely thin, hipless, soulless, sexless, with her pointed nose aimed like a low-class cheat in the direction of only another cornfield.

Laura had no respect, even for herself. It was sad. Real love, that place where you cross over *to* each other, they never had. Absent that, what had you? E.M. Cioran was right: *Happy in love, Adam would have spared us history.*

Eugene, who at one time felt only sympathy for her, sensing deep down that the opposite of ambition was not in fact laziness but depression, now truly began to despise her whole mode of shiftlessness, finding her behavior appalling and her attitude the embattled pose of a bitch. He could no longer avoid recognizing what she was, no matter the resolves he had made to understand her. The person he once cared for and had been trying to help was nothing but a bimbo rail-thin and fatally inelegant and yet craftier than a wagonload of motors, who with snooping ingenuity and oblivion for a heart not only went from man to man stealing their emotions and time and money like a hyena ranging the outside night but a person selfish in the extreme, a sponge who could delineate with accurate speech and adopt anybody's point of view while she fed on his heart like a raven a prophet's liver and then steal and lie and fuck and walk away with hyperborean indifference like cutting off your hands without a glance behind to some fortress location where, if it was just a place she wanted to be, you had no access but she sat encircled by razor-wire, microwave dishes, and sandbag revetments.

"I've had a lot of things to put up with lately," said Laura, folding her arms.

Get Watteau and a red crayon, thought Eugene coldly, managing to keep silent. He was trying to eat his food.

Half the time she wept, her tears were glycerin. Once you learn to fake sincerity—it was true—you can fake anything. Weekend after weekend when they met, she became worse and worse, and he would roundly castigate her, his plying good humor eventually having its limits. She would petulantly tuck her hair behind her ear, wet her lips, swallow without a word and with those mismatched eyes and the thousand-yard stare of the unemployed intellect only glare back at him in cold contempt. Why was he stuck with her and not in the company of Rapunzel? Was it fair? Shouldn't it be that if you asked for something that didn't exist, you nevertheless deserved it on the mere intelligence of the request? Did not Parmenides tell us that we cannot talk about what is not? If it is a given that movement is defined in terms of negation, reasoned Eugene, wasn't it true that change is not possible nor the idea of one thing not being another? He could not help but trace back Laura's outraged and insulting rehearsal of his faults to that ostentatious ritual of hers where, always sitting at a sulking remove, she would fill page after page in her notebook, recording his unkind words,

quoting only what she singled out to savor, all of it bad, only the negative, nothing positive, all as an anodyne that she could one day administer to herself against the need to want him—or whomever—back. It was a drama, her dumbshow, her unique revenge.

Her remark that she was now thinking of taking the bus to Syracuse uncharacteristically to spend the Christmas holidays with her grandmother was so obvious that he was convinced she would be staying in Boston. Was it to see somebody? To sleep with somebody? To slut for some slob at the Velour Motel or the T & A Tourist Home or the *Hotel Broken Window* by Joseph Cornell? What was the mystery—wasn't it always the case? You could solve her by algebra: y = mx + b, to find the slope of the line. Lately there was something about her in person and even over the telephone, in everything she said—even in her hard smile—that came across as sheer contempt. Her hands were troublesome to her as she talked. She was also cursed with a readable face, however, and could rarely hide how she felt about anything. A liar has to have a good memory, beyond that. She did not. She had a bad memory. Either way it did not matter to Eyestones. Still, he realized that it is standing at the side of an alligator, not the front, that is dangerous. Fear the swerve! Under another light he might have cared. Now he didn't care. A New Year's masquerade party was also being held at the Hotel de Dream. It had occurred to him to invite her. That was no longer a consideration.

She sat on saying nothing. Anxiety is the terrible destroyer of response. Change is one thing, progress, he saw, another. Change is inevitable.

But progress?

Laura now was suspicious, like a crow that, spotting the least geometry or pattern in any food laid out for it, will warily skit the free-fire zone. His eyes still hurt. It seemed like hours passed with her, abstracted, distant, staring off into midair as if evaluating the single thought she manifestly refused to share. He could watch her temporizing. He could see she relaxed only by display and out of design.

"What's the matter with you?"

He got up to let in the cat.

"I don't see anybody," she said with sober reattention, sensing tricky terrain. "Socially."

He returned and sat down.

"You accept that, don't you?"

Yes, if I could change eyes with a basilisk, thought Eugene, playing the Duchess of Malfi.

"I'm alone. I'm always alone, except—"

"At the movies?"

Silence.

She smiled and coquettishly pulled her hair over her mouth as if it were a stole, bandit-wise, and held it there, staring at him. He said nothing. She insisted on his attention. He was ashamed to be sad, at any time but on this day especially, as his thoughts melted into regrets.

She chewed a thumbnail and spoke into the silence.

"I think I went to see *The Night Porter*—"

"Recently?"

"Well, first of all--?"

"You just used *well*."

She huffed.

"Look, maybe, but I wasn't with anybody, if that's what you want to know," said Laura. "It's the truth. I was alone."

Her eyes fell before the things that had leaped to his as he listened, discerning line with intellect, color with emotion. At first she looked at him with the slightly widened eyes of a wolf from a Tex Avery cartoon and then visibly braced herself to explain. She connected sentences that came minutes apart.

"I remember because afterwards on the way home I stopped and got a caffe latte."

The inconsequential detail—and lying fact. Clever liars give detail, fashion fiction. He knew her, round the clock. His mind like searching fingers brought the unseen but delineable story to life as if he were reading Braille. Appearing to be what she was not, after all, was her job, her skill, her dodge. He felt her pride, heard her anger, saw her chiseling lust, watched her deceit, and wondered only if Cicero was correct in the second book of his *Rhetoric* when he asserted that the many lusts of men led them into one sin but that the one lust of woman led them into all sin. The riddle repeated. And all because two people once ate an apple in Mesopotamia, thought Eyestones. The doom of evil, repeated. Misalliance. He had said it often. But it was—is—true.

Laura became imperviously taciturn. She took off her welfare glasses and blew on them. A circus travels but is always the same. She first offered her coy, promotional smile, but it was followed by a gri-

mace of sand. It was a cold smile. It brought to mind in its irritating wrongness a memory of seeing her mouth without lipstick, visible in its natural outline, for the first time, when during the summer they had driven down to the beach and she wore what looked to him like a *brown fur* bathing suit and strode over the sand on long prehensile feet like a peacock's to a fishcart for hot fries every hour, smirking at every man both going and coming.

Will it ever be over? he wondered.

"What's that look for?" she asked, as she felt, nervously, a dragging at her face. She picked up her glass. He recognized the reluctant witness in her from their cross-country trip, how imperviously taciturn she could be, denying facts on the one hand while bringing them up as if fairly to weigh them, yet connivingly dead-legging whenever a question was asked that she did not want known. He surmised the nature of the larger issue from the small lie, in the way that the smell of money recapitulates a wake. The instant lie, coupled with a kind of lilting rubato of false notes, was her art form, small and pathetic but paradoxically authentic. He concluded that she was involved. Chasuble had no reason to lie. There was someone in the shadows controlling her emotions. And isn't the queen always guided by the last voice she hears? "As Chasuble often says at the office, quoting Madge Evans in *Stand Up and Cheer*, 'Wherever you go, you have to take you with you.'"

She checked her watch again. She was not yawning anymore. Her mouth was completely closed—not a muscle moved.

"You know?"

"What are you talking about?"

The speech of wood, the whisper of stones.

"I'm talking about the personal spirit," he said sincerely. "The 'that,' the quiddity, inscape, the substantific marrow, the essence. What is in you to value of the many things you withhold."

"Gobbledygook."

"Listen and take heed."

"Why?"

"Why not? Why does dawn arrive? Why do lilies kill cats? Why does the sun descend in purple light? Why does day break and never fall and night fall and never break? Why is New Jersey shaped like Vietnam and Vietnam like Korea? Why is the elephant the only animal with four knees? Why are crows never seen dead? Why do roses smell

better when dying? Why does every execution in Oklahoma take place at two minutes past midnight? Why does the middle star of Orion the Hunter's belt with its protoplanetary beauty shine so much brighter than the other two?"

"You keep mentioning that *constellation*," snapped Laura. "Always. I mean, what the fuck?"

Laura's was now the face of a sculpin, drawn with petulance and the rising heat of anger in once again having been found out, or so she sensed. A sense of humor is always inimical to fanaticism, thought Eugene, who regretted the pain that Snow caused Laura by the same kind of probing incivility he showed in quizzing her, and he wondered if she regretted any pain that she might have caused within him. Her eyes were moving like mice, the cobweb tips of her hair fluttering Medusa-like. Then it was eerie, for a silence fell. There were no more questions. They smiled uneasily at each other, dividing a thought. It was not the same thought, but only one of them truly knew that. The worst thing about ignorance is its insistency, thought Eugene, realizing all of a sudden that this surely was part of its definition. Future behavior is past behavior. The things you will do are what you have always done. There *is* matter in manner.

She set down her wine glass.

"You never touched your food."

"I'm not hungry."

She stood up.

"Where are you going?"

You could see a kind of race going on between her brain and her expression.

"I'm going back to my apartment." She turned away, her voice thinned out by *froideur*. Her fingers dribbled nervously over her hair as she turned back. "Remember how I said I want to learn to be independent? On my own? Well, I'm going to start now. It will be good for me."

What was she saying? Was this the "dead cat" bounce—that *anything* will bounce?

No one could carry specious cheerfulness to further extremes than Laura Warholic. Her stories, growing out of endless pretense and indefeasible and useless assemblages, were full of holes, expedient misunderstandings, and bald-faced lies. She was clearly too busy standing everywhere to stand anywhere. It was true: there is something dehu-

manizing about any sort of addiction. This time, however, in an uncharacteristically unsubtle about-face she was feigning sobriety. When she most found herself optimistic, delusion was always within reach. Nevertheless, she seemed almost happy.

He was about to mention it to her.

But when he looked up Laura was out the door.

And gone.
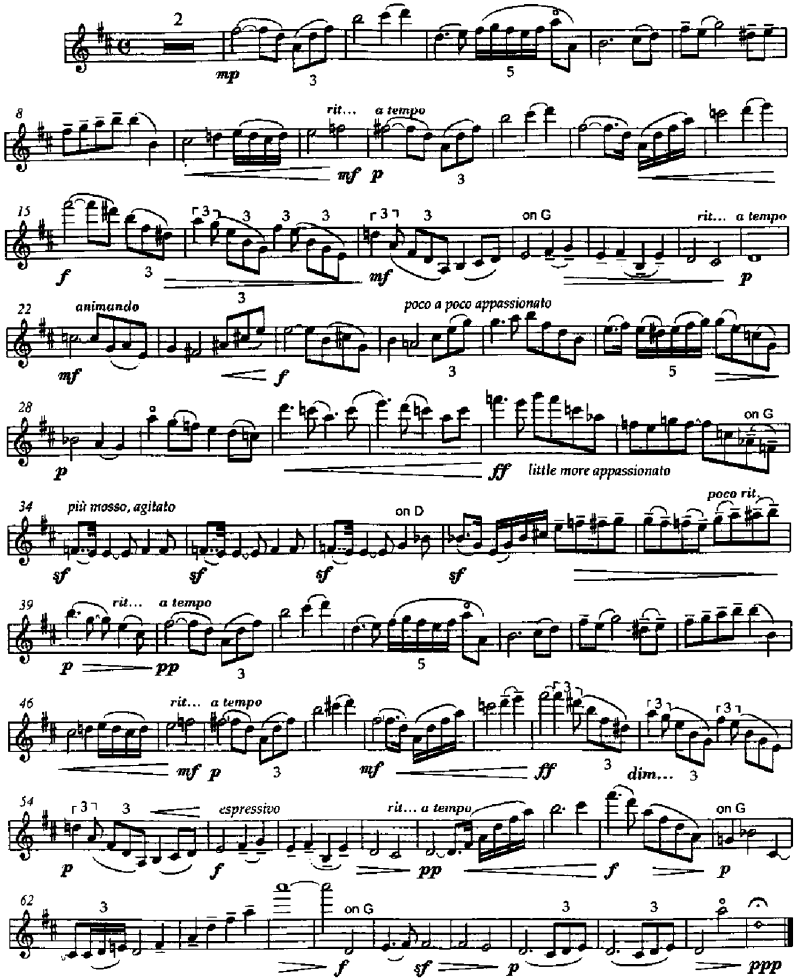
XLIV
Black Tulips

Eugene Eyestones took out his violin. It was a late hour on this wasted holiday, getting colder as the last coppery light was dying on the window. He took off his glasses and lay down and palmed his eyes to rest. His was the melancholy reflection that it was the first time since meeting Laura that with her departure he knew, finally, the relationship was over. Plenty of evidence: no proof. It was ample enough to probe the problem. Love when not a form of gratitude can take the form of greed, an avarice he had distinctly heard in her fatuous and ham-handed attempt to adopt phrases in voices different from her own to show that she was joking. Truth's persona is false by definition. He had seen enough. Goodbye, finally. Sadness seeks relinquishment. What did Duxbak say? "May the best day of your past be the worst day of your future." Why he felt remorse in being shut of her he could not say. Why shouldn't the disposition to stay lead to the temptation to go? He recalled wistfully, but not without relief, the lines of Louise Imogen Guiney's "Temptation":

> For the Romany under the oak
> A tent sprouts over-night!
> And sated of books and art
> Thither anew I stray.

Not even that beckoning smoke
Laughs twice on the morning light
Ere hillo! my heart, my heart
Is out of its leash, and away.

He took up his bow and with sweet solemnity in that unbreathable air infatuated with ghosts and defeated vigilance and futility played to the impasse of the night window, as black as the heart of conflict.



Relinquishment disintegrates a part of the self. In the recognition of absence, thought, inferior to the evidence it faces, assumes a profile, but nothing takes shape. It does not matter who leaves whom, an eclipse takes place. And there is the recoinnoitering pain. Two hearts, two lips are blotted out. Black tulips. It was inescapably true, as Irving Berlin once said: song and sorrow are playmates.

XLV
A Fish Needs a Bicycle

At Jeff's apartment, it was late, around 2:30 A.M. Drunk, he was rumblingly asleep, fat, flatulent, and dribbling. With a girl from a club he had played at the night before where he had been paid in drinks, he got walloping drunk doing "snake bites," decapitated shrimp shoved inside jalapeño peppers, then dropped in boiling oil, when he got the wet-dog shakes and all that he recalled before passing out was that she kept repeating, "You guys sound like Status Quo, but not really, you know? Stay away from Eighties Status Quo!" His frazzled, greying hair stuck out matted above the blanket under which he snored like a hibernating yak. As his fat cheeks alternately filled and blew air out of his fish-mouth lips—an uneven snore best put somewhere between an ascending interrupted diapason and an air-brake—he resembled Harpo Marx doing his famous "squish-face." A tattoo on his left arm of a leopard, rampant, seemed to snarl. Laura, who was wearing only panties and a white T-shirt, one he had told her he liked—it highlighted one word, *Fuct*, in bold black lettering—having managed to sneak into the room, was trying to crawl into bed with him. She kept inquiring in rasping whispers, "Are you asleep? Are you asleep?" She stirred his wrist. "Can you hear me, Jeff?" She prodded him. "I wanted to be with you at Thanksgiving."

She had begged him the previous night to let her sleep over, hopeful that the following night he would take her along to New Haven with

the Craven Slucks for a gig there, which he had taken to pay a mounting liquor bill. He made negligible money in a record shop called Needles & Trax where he worked sporadically, sometimes not at all and sometimes as many as sixty hours a week. Plapping his lips, feeling as if his head was going to explode, Jeff yanked the covers up over his head and with grunts noisily rolled over. She nudged him gently. "Can I get in with you, Baby Snooks?" asked Laura, who was freezing as she sat there. There was no answer.

The room was a magpie's, a fire-trap, dusty and unclean. Everywhere were stacks of boxed records, CDs, tape spools, press kits, and cheap promotional paraphernalia, things that record companies and radio stations hand out to promote bands. There were posters, 8 x 10 glossies of rock groups, and several cardboard stand-ups. Long rows of boxes were filled with a jumble of cables, bafflers, mikes, pedals, fuzzboxes, portable amps, old amplification parts, synth modules, headphones, piles of Elixir strings, sonic maximizers, space-racks, boom-stands, six-channel mixers, broadcast cartridges, stylus cleaners, broken keyboards, strobes, DJ effects, even several rolls of acoustic carpet-covering, and stacks of boxes of big black Bakelite rotary-knobs from a twenty-five-year-old tube recording board. A drum machine stood upside-down in a closet filled with keyboards, old radio ampfliers, a sixteen-track reel-to-reel recorder, a cassette deck, and on a shelf were boxes of Ampex tapes from the 1980s stacked in unwieldy piles. A tall chrome microphone stood sadly alone.

The man saved everything. A black electric Fender Squire Stratocaster stood against a wall, along with other older guitars and piles of fake-books. He was a fanatical A-l, fur-lined, dyed-in-the-wool record raccoon, one of those out-of-the-box vinyl freaks and mad anything-about-music obsessives whose perpetually curled hand betrayed the clawing motion arranged to flip through stacks of records until he dropped. It was a particular force-field that often exerted a special pull on lonely disenfranchised men who because they had no lives went off alone to weekend record shows, expos, and flea markets where you heard things from other inexhaustible coreligionists like, "Got any white label promos?" "I own twenty-seven different versions of 'Anyway You Want Me.'" "Wow, Bird on an old Savoy label! Check it oooouuutt!" "No *way* has anybody done 'Maybe You'll Be There' better than Billy & the Essentials!" "Do you have any vintage Ron Holden?" "Actually, you're wrong, that is *not* a true reissue of the Globetrotters'

'Rainy Day Bells' because that song was never released as a 45." He bought what he could afford, boosted all store-promos, occasionally took five-finger discounts, hoarded red vinyl, and over a long period of time had squirreled away a large vinyl collection that included everything from outré Sixties LPs to remaindered disco albums to Hawaiiana to camp things with titles like *Safari Sounds* and *Voodoo Classics* and *Music to Drink with Strange-Looking Ladies by Candlelight To*. ("You never know," he told Laura when showing her around, "these might be valuable someday.") He never played his records, for he believed that heat alone, never mind replays, badly decreased their value.

He was an aging rocker on the brink of divorce, an alcoholic burnout in his late forties with the face of a game-show host, a failure with extra-wide shoes, an interest in young girls, and decades of unresolved aggression. He was as humorless as an astronaut and in fact looked like one, a weak one, a bewildered one, one who because of some invalidating vice that was never disclosed was no longer allowed to go up in space. Several bottles of whiskey lay empty on the floor. A few of his band's old LP covers hung framed on a wall and some photographs of himself, signed "Stereoman." A photo of his wife hung near his bed. Laura was pushing him, hot to fuck. She nuzzled him in one of his ears. He tried to open his eyes, bloodshot and watery, but could barely see. He could not focus. She had been listening, earlier, to several early Slucks tapes, organ thieveries from the Zombies and Manfred Mann for the most part, along with primitive no-fi untempo slogs through bad Eighties revisions of almost-as-bad Sixties tunes with juvenile lyrics that seemed to come from the rhyming crapulosities of cheap greeting cards. She who had no faith, no vision, no religion, and no spirituality actually listened to, *believed in*, song lyrics, which in that vacant space he had created out of a cherished and continuous skepticism actually spoke to her. "I love that early stuff," Laura whispered in his ear. "You guys are great." He chewed a yawn and rolled toward the wall, muttering, "Leave me alone. I gotta sleep." She crooned a Slucks lyric sing-songily,

> "I saw you out in the coco snow
> waiting for no one but me
> but I'm down in the world below
> in my misery, baby, bay-bee
> Baby, bay-beeeee"

Laura rubbed his shoulder and butterfly-kissed his ear, and he almost responded but seeing her arm-hair, very like mohair yarn, put him off. He farted. He half-rose up, drooling, and gasped dryly, "I need some fucking sleep. We got a gig in New Haven tomorrow." She kissed his mussed hair and inquired, "Hey, were you on 'ludes and didn't include me?" She wanted to climb in bed with him but knew a heroin addict is no more interested in sex than an old turnip. Jeff had a history of enough disappointment and failure, he felt, to excuse not only drinking to excess but a decade or so of doing Tulnals, Seconals, Carbona, coke when he could afford it, which he almost never could, and "balloons" of opiates. A combination of codeine 4 and Doredin, called "dors 'n' fours," a potent sleep aid, potentially lethal together, had become his drug of choice after his wife, fed up with years of his violence and stupidity, had walked out on him. At first she did not want to get a divorce or at least felt ambivalent about it, for regarding her own sense of acquisition, she frankly did not want to lose—as she often confided in her girlfriends—their very valuable vinyl collection, much if not most of which was technically hers. They had met each other at a Mudhoney concert and got hastily married in Utah and had been miserably married for five years. Hoping for a new start, she had moved to New York City two years before to get away from him, his drinking, his depression, his terrible sense of defeat, his self-pity, his irrationality. One of the phenomena of his unappeasable rages was that in the grip of a conniption his eyes would terrifyingly bounce and actually begin to wriggle. She could not take it anymore.

Left all alone as he was, he became sullen and fought with the other Slucks—the group never got along to begin with and on a sort of tour through Europe in the early Eighties fought and split up and made up and fought more—and began not only drinking more but getting high to forget, taking Vicoden pills, slurping hycodan cough syrup, whatever. He told Laura that he took coke for sex and meth for highs. "I'm dancing with Mr. Brownstone," he would sweatily scream from on stage at the Middle East, meaning he was into heroin if the tell-tale signs involved pale skin and "pinned" eyes, except that was a pose as one could see from the fubsiness of his weight and double chins, because for years he took no heavy drugs and only claimed he did so in order to look cool.

He had no control. On several out-of-town gigs his musicianship

was affected and he would often nod off in cheap hotel beds with his face in a plate of mashed potatoes, a favorite junkie dish, although in his case it was a kind of comfort food he preferred even when he was straight and sober. Having worked in the record shop all day, at night he sat around washing down Valiums with cheap vodka or shots of Golschlager liqueur and watching X-rated videos with titles like *Mind Candy Emporium* and *Phreak Show* and *Mr. Poussaint's Unsaintly Penis* and *Hot Black Brownies*. Much of the furniture his wife had left in the apartment he sold for short money at Wronarski's's Pawn Shop for more drugs. He did dids and dors and jellies and trees and M&Ms and midnights and once in a while scored raw ephedrine from black dudes in the doorways in Central Square, slapping their hands in obsequious camaraderie, saying, "If you grow it, I'll mow it, man."

Jeff Bummely was a solitary, destructive person who, in a fit of jealousy, after their separation stole four of his wife's private journals and brought them back from New York to Boston to photocopy them to use against her. He had struck her several times, as well, always riding shotgun on everything she did from their earliest days together, such as screaming at her if and when she presumed, for example, to go to the movies alone and throwing fits of anger and jealousy whenever she presumed to look at, never mind speak to, another man. He was insecure and deeply threatened by her intelligence and literary talent and, although he himself preferred the company of women, became madly obsessed with owning her, once beating her up when she dared express admiration for a local rock group called the Quire Boys and its lead singer, Rainfield. Has it not often been said that the best index of a man's worth is the state of his wife's health? During the period that his wife had been with him, she had grown distracted and half-insane herself. The long and the short of it was that she immediately packed and moved out of the old apartment, indeed out of state, in order to preserve her sanity, never mind save her life, and, leaving Eyewobbles home snorting puppet powder, enrolled in various poetry courses, although several times a year she found it in her heart to return to Cambridge, mostly out of pity, to look in on her feckless husband less to see if he could still cope than to see if he were still alive. Although aware of his infidelities, jealousies, and competitiveness, she actually wished he would keep out of her life, for she soon found she was happily progressing with her own life, while he who was going nowhere was resigned to just sit around with three pet conures, a cat named Squanna, and the

dead-end life he woke up to every morning made no more coherent by an ounce-a-day weed habit than by Laura's hand-wringing solicitude. He liked to watch television, mostly Seventies sitcoms, and go to monster truck rallies in New Hampshire when he could. The truth was that she actually hoped that this childish man, this panfuriate loser, a creature of mad public displays and scene-making embarrassment, would actually meet another woman—she had long known he slept with other people but found it not only comic but a relief—and free her of any obligations to him, for with wifely certitude she knew better than anyone else that his tirades were born less of any low self-esteem or as-yet-to-be-identified genius than of the obvious but unavoidable fact that he was an alcoholic depressive.

It was the opposite with Laura. She wanted Jeff and in spite of his marriage thought that he needed her. He was, even if a trembly, self-absorbed, married sojourner who drank vodka by the quart, a good match for her. She had a penchant for fraught relationships. She yearned for—yearned to adopt and wanted to be adopted *by*—rock musicians, colorful literary failures, pale headbangers, suavo archetypes with bandannas tied around their biceps, and starting way back in high school long dreamt of having affairs with long-haired guys named Scorch or Trevor or Rick who, even if they smelled unappealingly of cigarettes and booze, were part of the rebellious, 'zine-reading Dial B for Bum-in-Hand youth of today. She was like a small tree played upon by opposing tropisms. It was the constant source of bewilderment to Eyestones. She hoped to grow yet always defeated herself in her choices. Another example of "splitting."

The low-rent flat on the top floor of an old mud-yellow brick apartment building in Central Square, formerly his wife's, was less than a mile from where Laura lived, and morning and night Laura walked by—repeatedly, obsessively—to see if his lights were on. Suspicious, jealous, she had once seen a dark, pretty girl come out the front door of the building one morning and that very same night saw a stuffed bear on Jeff's shelf that she had never seen before. Another time a young girl ran out so fast that she missed her in the main but did manage to see that she was actually wearing silver elbow gloves like Penelope of the Avengers and clear Perspex glasses! One weekend the previous May, spying for hours from a doorway in the pouring rain, she swore she had actually seen coming through the front door Jeff's blonde wife—after they had returned from a week together in San Francisco

where they had gone to look at the huge Sequoias—when Laura took malicious pleasure in hatefully glaring at her. The singer, in any case, the next morning rented a minivan to drive to New Haven but flatly refused Laura's obsequious and desperate pleas to accompany him and the band. She spoke in an alto whisper, "I'll do anything for you. I'm all alone. I have no friends. Please don't shut me out. Don't desert me. I need you." He kissed her neck. "Don't bust my chops now," he said, shoving a few small cases into the van.

"Please?" Laura begged. "Come on, baby. I need you, Captain Gingersnaps."

Jeff shook his head. He was aware that his wife was again going to be coming from New York over the weekend with the gift of a new wheat-grain machine for him by which he could make health drinks. She bought it to stem his recently accelerated rate of drinking, which she had heard about, but mainly she wanted to keep him from dropping in on her, and of course he ludicrously took it as a sign there might be hope for them. It behooved him to get out of Cambridge, he figured, to forfend any chance of the wrong people bumping into each other at his flat.

"I'll make it worth your while."

He shook his head. "I gotta go. I got this New Haven gig and then," he lied, "I got to do a mixdown session, baby. It's a buncha shit, but I got days of work ahead of me."

"Take me with you."

"I can't."

What she did not realize was that he had a dewy twenty-one-year-old girl named L'Nor waiting for him at Toad's and the last thing he or any of his friends wanted along with them was an outraged madwoman with big hair and long feet and thinner than piano wire poaching on his life, questioning his friends—who knew, maybe even making a terrible scene or two. Laura Warholic had become for him when he was drunk a sexual outlet, only a lonely alternative for him, who was socially inept himself. He was willing to put up with her in his life, such as it was, but only marginally and solely and precisely for the way she flattered him, and for no other reason. It is the tactile stimulation by parasite fish, gentle tickling alone and not at *all* their cleaning ability, that endears them to the larger fish they service, as the Sexual Intellectual had more than once pointed out to her at the Boston Aquarium, but she had never paid attention. In his vain stupidity, Jeff had not the

slightest idea initially of how extreme or angry or unhinged Laura in her consuming obsessions could become or from the start of their relationship the game might have been shortened not by the mercy rule but by depression or disgust. Bewildered as to why a previous girlfriend never came by anymore, for example, he was unaware that Laura in her guile, having ascertained where the pretty girl worked in Savin Hill, had already sent several nasty, anonymous letters accusing her of stealing to the head of the company where she worked in hopes of getting her fired. Writing lunatic letters was of course her skill: mean letters to Mutrux, gruesome letters to Gayle Bagle, ferocious letters to her father. But she had another face when she wanted the job. She constantly tucked notes into Jeff's mail-slot signed "The Prying Mantis," a particular act she thought witty. She used other aliases as well. She wrote voluminous letters, pages filled on both sides with explanations of why she was good for him. And of course she entertained him from their very first meeting with long, mocking stories about Eugene Eyestones, how inept he was and bullying, hoping to win his grace and favor.

The van was almost loaded. Jeff was racing up and down the stairs with final things, and she was following him up and down like a beaded vole.

"You're a genius," she effervesced. In her potato love, she had lately boned up on pop music. "Where did you guys get that off-the-cuff feel and learn those great Pink Floyd chord progressions?" They were upstairs. "Like this?" He picked a purple guitar and bashed a chord.

"Yeh," said Laura, admiringly.

"I'm taking this 1970s Electra-MPC guitar with a built-in octave-doubler, flanger delay, and treble-bass expander. It's pretty enough to shag."

"Jeff, can I ask you a question?" He was running downstairs. "You won't get mad?"

"Now what?"

"Who gave you that?

"What? What?"

"That . . . plant." An amaryllis upstairs she had never seen before, one shooting stalk with a cap, stood outside his door in a clay pot as rigid as a cockpole.

"Oh Christ, man, I gotta go."

She stood there. *Fuck you*, she thought.

Waiting until the van departed, sitting in a Starbucks up the street, Laura quickly flashed back up the stairs to the apartment like a mad Doberman, all speed and teeth, ran into the long hall and through all the rooms, where she began flashing through Jeff's coat-pockets and rifling each and every drawer in his bureau. She threw boxes this way and that. She angrily slid her hand under the pillows, shook the rumpled New Kids on the Block pillowcases, and rummaged up and down under the mattress to see if anything had been hidden there. She had a closer look at all the things that he collected. The place *was* a record armory—the singer was an inveterate magpie, a real hoarder, as a matter of fact—and threw absolutely nothing out, even used Kleenex. He had once worked for a piano mover and had learned on that job to hoover up anything he could. Guitars! A plastic Big Tiger's head! Tambourines! Thousands of McDonald's Happy Meal toys! It was a warehouse of speakers, rolled-up rugs, stuffed animals, mismated shoes, figurines, tons of stereo equipment, plastic discs, row upon row of reel-to-reel tapes, more amps, boxes of albums and rare, collectible 45s organized in small 7 x 7 striped boxes, and mint records he neurotically squirreled into corners and never played lest he lower their value. There was a large, coiled, acrylic, supercharged waterpipe that he owned, called a "ripper" in the Seventies, that he was certain was valuable. In her search, Laura ransacked bureau drawers, suitcases, and various shelves. Eventually she found a bag of pot with his wife's name and address in New York City and phone numbers stuck inside it, which she had been hoping to find for a long time. She quickly wrote down all the numbers, cursing under her breath. Out on the kitchen table, she checked a few papers he had been working on, sheets filled with song titles he had crossed out and a few incoherent and immature lyrics to songs. He must have been drunk, she thought, as she considered the childish loops of his crude, simian handwriting, revealing paraliteracy's first sign, large messy printed letters like a four-year-old's, coupling upper case letters with lower. She read:

This bOyS got to become a man . . .
it feelSd feltIt so [rwite] Right
I wanted You, bUt >I can't have you

She hoped it was about her. She needed him. She needed someone. She sat in the dark, crying, wiping her nose, alternately angry,

then hopeful, angry again, snapping on the light, reading the lyrics, rereading them, smiling, then growing doubtful again, shutting off the light. She sat in the bitter dark, cursing and hearing echoes, suddenly realizing the lyrics were about Jeff's ridiculous wife, whom, as he had told her, he had alienated but badly wanted back. Alienated, as even he admitted, by screwing up. Screwing up by cheating on her. Cheating on her by fucking around with different women. She had heard of them from day one and hated the bitches. Lorraine. Beth. Maria. L'Nor. Laura looked disgustedly into a black mirror and caught a foolish glimpse of herself as a sort of homely ruffled goose or long-necked marsh crane with an awkward bill. Once again she was forced to face as she never could not the asymptotical refluxes of her manhunts for never being able to bring one near to completion, tripping herself up with sadder and more and more neurotic acts of self-despair. Quickly yanking out another drawer she discovered a pile of letters and began flashing through them, this time specifically looking for the name of Jeff's wife. There was a photo of a young sexpot on a beach in a green light-fiber tan-through swimsuit: on the back was written "68% nylon, 32% Dorlastan Spandex, 100% naked—me! To 'Stereoman'!" She also saw a bunch of pink-bordered letters in a feminine hand with a Fordham University postmark. It left no doubt. There it was—*Juliette*—and a telephone number. A manila envelope had photos of her, some in jeans, one big-bummed in Utah, another in a pair of rapacious, nearly five-inch stiletto-heeled pointed court shoes in black and silver. With her mouth dry as a lime basket, Laura quickly scanned six or seven letters in the pile looking for any effusive passages of love. Fine calligraphy, educated allusions, even the dotted *i*s infuriated her. Her hands were shaking and trembling with anger.

Laura froze in fury, blushing with uncontrollable anger, the spinal links of her backbone freezing like a horripilant chain of white knuckles as she went to sit down but contracted serpent-wise in a bent, squeezing emotion that almost broke her bladder. Her hair was dry and wild like glaga as she flung the photos against the wall.

Fuck him! She wasn't going to sit around and wait for anybody, no way, not like it was in San Francisco, waiting at home like a white slave, while Minot Warholic, drunk and horny, stayed out with those whorish streetwalkers and various friends until dawn, reeling home drunk and full of insults. There were plenty of "snacks" around. Seeing twenty dollars on a shelf, she snatched and pocketed it, thinking nothing of

stealing—the bastard deserved it—checked through a *Boston Phoenix*, and decided to go out to a club. There were a few groups playing, none good. The Fishwipes. Bo and the Bread Bowls. The Liars, a local rock group still around from the Eighties, long past it, whose reputation never quite reached beyond the boundaries of Route 128. The Nailguns.

She threw on her jacket and ran out of the apartment and took the first bus to Somerville, where it turned out the Liars were playing that night in a lesbian bar called the Sewing Circle. Suddenly she needed noise. She had a thought of trying to sleep with the lead singer, who also played piano and tambourine, after once seeing his picture on a flier at an In Your Ear record store on Commercial Avenue, but the photograph on that album cover had been taken back in 1979, and when she got there what she saw was an oval-headed nitwit with glasses, middle-aged and poached-pale, with rubbery skin and wild grey hair. It had remained her one dream since pimply adolescence to go to bed with a rock singer. But had she managed to sleep with Robin Zander of Cheap Trick, her sole teenage ambition? No way, and that hurt, for it had brought down on her head nothing but mockery and scorn from half the girls in high school who shunned her as a yahoo and gave her the horrible name Strange-O. Things had not got better, only worse. Now she could not only not even land a married alcoholic dirtball but was sitting watching a weak hump-combo from Boston fronted by an old fat fart with Klimt-like hair who was just about able to hit an E chord. What did she care? She could do all right. On the bus her only thought was *fuckyoufuckyoufuckyoufuckyoufuckyou*. "Fuck you, you fucking fuck," she said aloud. "Fuck you, you *lying* fucking fuck!" She had made the sad reflection as she got off the bus that at least in the years when she lived in Astoria, even if friendless and isolated, she at least had the chance to sleep with the lead guitarist of Fartz, blown a few guys from Roast Belief, got to ride to the airport once with the Outsiders for a hand-job, and even now she was still writing to a homely but hypervitalized spider-monkey-like bearded guy in Arizona who was a roadie for Underneathica. Now what? Should she just blow town, leave Cambridge, and go back to live in San Francisco?

XLVI
The Sewing Circle

The Sewing Circle, doom-dark, was a cavernous club, loud and smoky. It was packed sardine-tight with amazons, cowboy girls, berdaches, women in lumber-jackets, dime bull-dykes, inertinites, female mastodons, kickboxing bansheettes, tribadists, succobovaients, gynoids, sex sufists, dandle queers, sexual variety artists, female infonauts, exchromonians, tinjinkers, bold she-males, old boy actresses, lumbermothers, algogenesolagniasts, gregomulcts, mammathigmomaniacs, asylum-seekers, *nerdoïdes*, two-fisted falsettists, ambiguas, half-and-half figures, neurosthenic seek-sorrows, and various other big-boned women anesthetical to the lacquers of glamour and lineaments of grace. Loud music was playing. Ann Marie Tubb and The Krauthammer, who frequented the place, happened to stop by that night and recognized Laura Warholic from her mad peremptory visits and scenes she had made in the past to the *Quink* office, who—with vermilion fingernails, part of her mountainous hair pulled to the side with a scrunchie, and wearing a tight, neoplastic cowboy-brown jacket—was sitting at a small corner table back in the shadows, propped up as if with a purpose, and scribbling in a journal that she kept at hand like a kempt man his comb, that old ploy for creative visibility she had often used in the desperate hope of adding not only a bit of mystery to herself but also perhaps conveying as well something of the profile of a rock critic, a position to which she presently had aspirations and that now loomed

in her infertile imagination the summum bonum of life.

Laura waved to order a drink. "Straight gin and bitters," she called out, but the waitress ignored her. Her voice was small. She was nervous, awkward in the smooth near-darkness that hid her fungible imperfections.

"Warholic's ex, right?"

She looked up.

"I've seen you at the Girl, right? The City Girl Café. You hang there? Or do you go to, what, the Purple Monkey in Willimantic? What about the Clit Club in New York? You come here alone?"

"I wasn't married to him long enough to matter," said Laura, looking away ruefully.

They were women alert to any sign of gender issues or non-inclusive language.

"Married to *him*?" asked Ann Marie Tubb.

"*It*!"

The Krauthammer, putty-faced and obese with her cartoon-villain chin, a ragged ponytail, and elongated cast-iron elephant earrings like opium weights, threw her jacket over a nearby chair and yanked down the sleeves in a jerk. "What's the problem? Someone lick the red off your candy?" "Nothing," said Laura. The Liars, the band playing up front with strained vocals, calliope sounds, and wheezing guitars, were godawful, with a lead singer, a barnyard vocalist, half-drunk, drooling and circle-faced, singing juvenile lyrics in a mediocre voice that squeaked like frozen peas. A Byrds clone with a mandala of stringy hair, he wore a paisley shirt, black Levis, and black leather boots that had needles for toes. He was strictly from hunger. Club people ignored them. It was a garage group that had played in local punk dungeons like the Rat and Cantones. After a deal with Sire had failed to generate any public interest in them, they literally could not give their records away. "They play here once a month and come cheap," said the waitress, sloshing the table with a wet sponge, in reply to Laura's question. "You don't like them? They played at malls and made in-store appearances like about a decade ago. Teenage-girl shit. What can I say, honey, time passes." She wheezed laughter. "Remember the old joke about the elephant who ate prunes and the little guy with the shovel behind him? That's showbiz!"

"You know-wo whatta girl can dooo,

I doowowown't wanna hafta tell yooo
Darlin, hey I'm talking to yooo-ooo
You know-wo whatta girl can doo . . . "

"Caterwauling!"

"Fucking *eggbeating*!"

"Jesus!"

"I could sing better, know somethin', whackin' my hand under my fat smelly armpit," said The Krauthammer.

"Amateur hour!"

Ann Marie Tubb, who had also witnessed several of Laura's scenes at *Quink*, as who did not—embarrassing office standoffs and public cat-fighting harangues with her ex-husband over money—gave her a glance like the reveille of a trumpet. She was wearing boots and an *I Go From Zero to Bitch in 2.5 Seconds* T-shirt. "Want a blunt?" she asked, a cigarette wagging in her mouth. "I don't smoke." "You don't want to make some moocah? Dig sweet Lucy?" "Sorry," said Laura. "OK then, want some free advice? In this life, depend on no one but yourself. You listening, Linda? Take it from someone who knows." She gulped her drink. "Fuck Warholic!"

"Laura."

"Whatever."

"My name's Laura."

"Laura La Plante, the camp actress?"

"*Laura-a-a*," sang The Krauthammer in her gravelly voice, sliding crotch-first into a backward chair, "*is a faa-ace in the blah blah night.*" She was chewing gum that sounded like a woodchuck eating a carrot. Shrugging, Tubb pulled up the collar of her jean jacket. "Bad fashion statement," said The Krauthammer in her typhoon whisper, leaning over and fingering the nap of Laura Warholic's shiny jacket. "Where did you pick that bit of chintz up, the Cheapo Depot?"

"Do you recognize us? From work?"

"You drive a Jeep, right?"

"That's my mo-chine. Too butch for you?"

"You bi-curious?" asked a suddenly advertent woman at the next table who looked like Anna Q. Nilsson in *Ponjola*, booted, with a necktie, short-slicked-back hair, and eyefolds with the "hang" of a Balençiaga.

"Would she know?" asked The Krauthammer.

"She wouldn't know," replied Ann Marie Tubb.

Both women had pegged Laura as a victim, a lonely but empty-headed, pissed-off slut-penitent, celery, an uneducated stick-cum-secretary addled with unintelligence, a willing piece of sexual fluff they could recruit to any remark or rite they wanted to engage in, if it ever came to that. They felt that yam-in-the-mouth pop critic Camille Paglia, a particular guru of theirs, was correct when she asserted with that penetrating insight characteristic of her that stupid women deserve to be raped. "That a retro jacket?" asked a tall waitress, swabbing the table and not sticking around for an answer.

A woman who looked like a guy in a David Byrne Big Suit wearing severe ground-gripper shoes and her hair in a crew cut boldly quipped of Laura, "Thinness skeeves me." She shot her cuffs in a manly gesture. "I was once married quotation marks in servitude to a thin man from West Nyack who collected carnival chalkware and specialized in fifty-hour-long quarrels that used to culminate with his rubbing jam in my hair." She had a voice that could have been used to split firewood. "He hated me. He used to complain that I had derrière-dimples. Cottage cheese. The orange-peel effect."

"You put up with that?" asked Ann Marie Tubb.

"No, that's my point," replied the Crew Cut. "He got drunk one night, grabbed my tit, and I beat the shit out of him with a fish club." She lit a cigarette.

The waitress reappeared. "I remember seeing that kind of op-art jacket at Page 3 down in Greenwich Village in the late Sixties."

"Ever hear of that dyke den?" asked Ann Marie Tubb of Laura, pushing her blunt nose forward.

The Krauthammer, throwing out an elbow, hocked out a fart-blast of a laugh and hooted, "She wishes."

"I've heard of Page 3," said a blonde wearing door-knocker earrings, chartreuse leather pants and a white T-shirt reading *I Love Djibouti.*

"What about the Cubby Hole, the Canal Bar, and MK's? I did law work in Manhattan for years." She gestured. "Who's that girl with the shaved head?"

"Me?" asked the Crew Cut.

"No," said the blonde coldly and walked away, saying, "I wouldn't put up with cellulite in a golf ball!"

Confused, Laura seemed unprepared for the crackling conver-

sation.

Jerking her head toward Laura, Ann Marie Tubb tapped her temple and whispered, "She's out—"

"—where the buses don't stop, I know, I know." The Crew Cut shrugged and nodded with comprehension.

"She's got protein plaque in the brain."

"Louisa, Dr. Alois Alzheimer. Dr. Alois Alzheimer, Louisa."

"Laura," Laura corrected them.

"What is it, you don't get out that much?" asked The Krauthammer of Laura.

"You sleep with a moolie, right?"

"And *coal*-hatch black! I've seen him. Yugg!"

"Her head's wobbling. In poker we call that a 'tell.' She's on edge."

"I don't spend a lot of time in my room, no," said Laura. "I can't, I'd go out of my mind."

"I take Tuinals in my room to *go* out of my mind."

"How is it any worse than having once been married to that barnyard pig, Warholic?"

"Oink."

"I hate the bastard. He owes me money," said Laura. "I'm giving testimony in court to sue his ass."

The Krauthammer antagonistically pronounced from her large goose-fish mouth, "If I had been married to Warholic, I'd have supplexed the fat prick on the first honeymoon night for starters, and then mat-slammed the fucker every night after that just on principle, OK? 'It's Mama!' I'd scream. What, I'm making this up?" She flexed one arm muscle, then the other. "Look at these guns. I'd castrate the dork. Turn him to goosefat."

Mewled another, "Schmaltz."

"That smells like my armpit."

"Jewchew."

"I hear his cock is no bigger than a bath-plug in the first place—a fucking filbert." It was the Crew Cut enfirming herself in her hard shoes. She seemed to swim in her suit. "A goddamn pinecone. So now he's playing God with it?"

It was a place filled with hammerheads, most of them 250-pound monster women and manweasels with flattops. Did lesbians mimic men, wondered Laura, and thereby buy into the tropes of typical fe-

male behavior if they so insisted on ludicrously maintaining the line between butch and femme?

"By the way, I personally object to the word *testimony* regarding a woman's sworn statements, simply because"—she crudely grabbed her crotch—"the etymology of the word is *testes*. Get it? Male jingle bells. Grapes. My own preference, not that you asked, is for the word *ovarimony*!" The Krauthammer guffawed, wheezing and rearranging her greasy bell-pull of hair. "The personal *is* political, right?"

They all three of them spoke briefly and nastily about Warholic, of the political intrigues at *Quink* and the fools at the office, Discknickers, Ratnaster, Mutrux, Gnorm, and all the other fascists there whom they disliked. The Krauthammer shouted, "Three Dead Dogs all around!" "I'll have straight gin and bitters," said Laura to the returning waitress. She paused. "Do the Craven Slucks ever play here?" she asked, paying for all the drinks in an attempt to ingratiate herself. It was necessary to shout as the Liars were now in high report, with the moon-faced lead singer in his mid-forties with double-chin and fogged glasses screaming bubble-gum lyrics with what had to be one of the most impoverished voices on earth. A reverb-flecked cacophonous organ kicked in with several off-key chords.

"That singer, Christ!" bitched Ann Marie Tubb. "I thought men functioned only on three channels, food, sex, sports—no one ever said nothin' about murder! 'Dyke Kills Dipshit' the headline would read." She paused and turned to Laura. "Are you shocked, Louise?"

"Laura."

"Don't be. I'm like a proton or an electron in quantum mechanics placed at a crossroads where it can travel to the left or right: I go both ways."

Smoke was filling the room. She was introduced to Aunty Freeze, Jill Rebarbaro, Misty Miss Fisty, and Vera Vagina. A youngish girl with a tongue-bolt and spiky viridian hair sticking up as if showing the shock of execution could be seen wandering around the crowded club in a continuous torrent of tears, eating a slice of pizza between sobs. "I'm an acomovulvate," shouted fat-assed Isabel Rawsthorne, a wallop-thigh-sized middle-aged greyball going up to another woman who looked like a tin-cup chimp. "*Barbarella* meets *The Nutcracker*," snorted Ann Marie Tubb, sipping her drink. "*I'll never marry a m-a-a-an*," sang Jill Rebarbaro, doing a lilting skip from *Brigadoon*. On the butch-o-meter she made Gertrude Stein look like a pocket whisk-broom. "I

don't need a man," said another, crooning, "just some of his best swimmers." Another huge dilated-eyed woman wagging a blue handbag—Mrs. DeKooning with teeth—sucked a drink and screamed, "'I could taste the bomb. I tasted the lead,' said Colonel Paul Tibbets who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. *He* was a man." A brother and sister duo, Cathy and Ricky Bleeks, began to dance: Cathy was a short, fat, transsexual male with aquamarine Brazilian bracelets and a pig nose-ring, and her blockheaded partner, Ricky, a mousy woman wearing Fay Wray hair, stopped at the microphone up front to bellow with a raised fist, "Who's into sex-negative feminism?" Everybody ignored them. "We are!" Everybody continued to ignore them. A cawing woman ran by blowing a trumpet. A skull-thin woman in a man's jacket and conspicuous trilby à la Patti Smith wearing a pair of shoestringless shell-toe sneakers walked over to two strangers standing aimlessly by the door and said, "My name's no longer Brenda. Call me Florian, OK? That's my new name, Florian." She had seriously ophthalmic eyes and her angry smile was made more ferociously macabre by the smear of an atrocious night-black lipstick she wore. A long, flexile neck arched in a strange sinuous movement that a person of charity might compare to a swan but anyone more realistic to the sly ophidian who tempted our common mother.

"Think about joining R. L. sometime," muttered Aunty Freeze to Florian.

"What's that?" asked Vera Vagina.

"*Real life!*"

A beautiful young woman with a matchless profile and cold silver eyeshadow and thigh-high patent-leather boots in a far corner was using a devoted man kneeling beside her as an ashtray and who kept urgently whispering to her, "You're God. You're God!" "I'll believe in God when he can make a man like a vibrator," mooed the soubrette, kicking the lackey. It was Misty Miss Fisty. She had loftily deigned to give her servant a complex set of algorithms and commands involving the comprehension of his wormhood and smiled at everybody. "I'm into teledildonics: simulated sex at a distance." She leaned back and sucked at a martini. She wore black latex gloves and held up a finger and sang,

> "Have you heard of the Amazon queen
> Who invented a fucking machine?

Concave or convex,
It fit either sex
And was exceedingly easy to clean!"

Beside them a dark woman in a Garbo-like foulard was sitting on a shelf, legs decussated, reading a book entitled *I'm Her, She's Him*, while a short, homely, chipmunk-cheeked woman in her fifties named Sheila with batlike features—short chin, snub nose—and a wide, thick body with a massive pooch of an abdomen said to someone at the bar, "I want to give birth to myself, but my question is who's gonna raise me?" I'm Trudy Couture," said an immense blonde with a striplight and drug tracks down one arm. She had the soft focus eyes and nearly toothless smile of a Keva devotee. "I used to do drugs. Now I'm into body damascening. Wanna see my bum?" A Baby Doll chick, stratospheric ally tall who was seated across the way with scary white hair, big pale calves, and the pocked face of a battlefield, alternately kicked off her white majorette boots and addressed Laura from across an aisle with, "So what's the story, pipe-stem, you het or half-het? I'd call you a bottom bi."

"Wrong."

"You're a lying guppie."

"Hey, take a U-turn, fuckface!" growled Ann Marie Tubb, her eyes shooting darts. The Krauthammer took out a wad of gum and threw it at her. "Don't bother about these juiceballs, her or that Marjorie Main-loony in the donkey hat by the telephone talking to herself like there was nobody home," interposed Mrs. DeKooning with teeth. I've seen her over in Dorchester in doorways picking up cans and getting free kips in the donasteries, lesbo love houses, and acting like a spaz."

"Shaved your bikini zone lately?" Baby Doll asked Laura.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"It's just that she's so hairy." She turned to fat Sheila and declared, "I could massage that volleyball off to you, slants." Sheila indignantly squawked, "Piss off!" "Don't get up a tall tree, Chinamoona," deblaterated the angry Baby Doll chick, a Seventies throwback, one of those holdovers from the days when woman not only studied the phases of the moon, alphabet dolmens, and mnemonic finger-poems but executed paintings with menstrual blood and in sympathetic groups gathered with mirrors to study their private parts, which they named after flowers and found irresistibly beautiful. "I run an ointuary down

in Marshfield where I give rubdowns. To me it's a chance when I see a challenge here to offer slather jobs of musk, votiver, myrrh, bergamot, and sandalwood." "I'll go," said one of the Goth durables there with a body as big as a mattress and a metal clip through her lip. "My name's Gerry Gowanus, I'm bone stiff from my own business, spanking girls with lacrosse racquets." "I know, I know, you spanked me once," offered a bodacious jungle girl with a nose like the upthrusting shape of an agave plant. "I met you at Shibaricon, the world's first Japanese rope-bondage conference." She pertly stuck out her bum with a fetching fiddle-faddle. "Veronica Quinquigesima? From Athol, Mass? I'm into heat meditation: tum-mo yoga." "I won't go. I don't have time," cawed Sheila who still had "eyes for guys" and was living on the border of jealous mayhem being married to a philandering stand-up comedian who worked out of Providence, R.I., which left left her alone to her one-man business of catering weddings. "I make cakes. I hire organists. I send cards to the new couples." "Well, stop sampling your cakes, Rubber Baby Bumpers, OK? You're fat enough wearing that white dress to show a home-movie on!"

"Shall I turn on my bitch faucet?" asked Ann Marie Tubb of the Baby Doll chick. "Screw. *Ska-rew*!"

"Right, back to the Israeli army!"

"And in uniform."

"With a zipper fly."

A ring-nosed lesbian theater directrix butted in to snap with an android twang, "I agree. The wuss is too hairy, like angora. I don't go in for unbarbered arms. They creep me out. And since we're being frank, Loretta—"

"Laura."

"Whatever. You should really do something about your front bumpers, though. Why don't you go out and spring for a Lily of France 'X-Bra' with the 'adjust-to-stun' pull-string at the front to squeeze out some weaponage from what little you've got up front there?"

Mainly the clientele were female, "womyn festival" types, apex predators, most of them, hard as tea-stick bamboo and on the north side of forty-five with trademark tongue-in-cheek raised collars and severely shaped duck's-ass haircuts that in most in cases looked as if starving wolverines had madly cribbled at them. There were also some men in various stages of transferal and transfiguration. At a far table sat a huge unidentifiable *thing* with an unshaven acromegalic jaw and a

fluffy red-haired wig. It turned out to be Larry Clucker in a frock, looking like some kind of demented futuroidal, a ghost in women's fasteners, an over-berouged hormonal twigger, the new bride as a marginal member of Insane Clown Posse in some kind of animal love-fight with itself! "Is that a female or a faux-male?" queried the *Brigadoon* dancer, with risible eyes. Someone approached him/her to ask him/her the time, and he/she howled with the strident voice of a Paul Bunyan, "Time to piss off, motherfist! Go and do the five-knuckle shuffle!" "Pardon me," said hairy-faced Susan B. Anthony Diebold through teeth broken so badly they looked like the Ardmore Alignment, a she-thing built like a baseball catcher, her face, round, cracked, and leathery, just like the glove. She tapped a cigar-blunt-short woman cursing at the bar. "But if you're going to use that kind of language, um, could you sit with me?" "I'm Dale from Exeter, New Hampshire," said another fat woman next to Laura's table, a tallish, matronly, big-bummed grayish-blonde with ugly white eyelashes and a bulbish Buster Brown hair-bob almost snap-on in its appearance, rubicund face, and fat lips. "Haven't I seen you at UBIQUITOUS?" Taken aback, Laura said that she didn't think so. "No? You don't belong? Uppity Bi Queers United In Their Overtly Unconventional Sexuality? I happen to be the current president. I joined after three bad marriages, the last to a demented physician whose three kids from hell I couldn't take anymore and tried to kill"—she framed a large headline with her two parting forefingers, pronouncing fake-dramatically, "'Propylene Stepmother Arrested in New Hampshire Scandal'—which you probably have read about in the papers, right? I came out. I'm clear. I'm finally free. I moved down here. I'm on my own. I live over in Cambridge. I sculpt. I hate men. You into bathwater?"

"Don't mind her. She's a compulsive with an IQ lower than a pro-golf score. She tells the same story to every stranger. Everybody ignores her."

"She's stupid."

"And a dullard."

"Dale *means* flat."

The Baby Doll chick said, "But you don't look down on us, do you?"

"No," said Laura.

"If homosexuality is an illness, we should all call in 'queer' to work tomorrow."

Laura, who suddenly recalled that Eugene Eyestones, laughing at mankind's revisionism, had once told her that Sappho of Lesbos had in fact been married, had given birth to a daughter, actually fell in love with men, and in the end died—committing suicide at Lesbos by leaping into the sea—over the love of a man, one proud Phaonas, was wondering what he would think of all this as she looked around, impressed but feeling somewhat anxious, at the incongruous gathering of hose queens, flagellants, lecheuses, pusses in pantos, women completely bald, groove mimes, art fags, dykes-on-bikes, switch-hitters, attack princesses, nude bizarros with nipple-clamps and colored hair, frosted-blonde gigantesses with leathery tans and rock-hard breasts, metatropists, butt burglars, noctiphiliacs, omnisexuals, human ditch-cougars, paraphimoids, turdicants, sensory-deprivation junkies, genitorturers, sodomniphages, chicks with stubble, big-titted vergognas, old ladies with thin dead hair, face-chewers and Christ-biters, omniphages, Granola dykes, sex wolves, plug-ugly music strumpets, muffketeers, big-eyed underpops, digitomaniacs wearing black, breatharians, tanned Caliphonies, self-absorbed gymnosophists, and all sorts of half-grained intersexuals and genderwents with slick DAs in mackinaws and Doc Martens and raised collars and fat jeans, even a few thin, pale, horny guys in black leather jackets standing around sucking toothpicks and shouting, "Hey, shake your booty, lame ass!" and "Butthead, over here!" and "What's happenin, dude?"

The women had shouting voices and short hair and pudgy Raphaelite arms and odd pre-fab names like Judy Borrego, Jo-Ann Fabrics, Tisa Steelyard, Mutt Mailpull, Tay Sacks, Jane Heape, Greta ("The Great Western") Himmler, Golda Silva, Big Doris Pushkar, Mistress Corian, Polly Pincus Pokus, Myra Tyvek, Edwina ("Bulldog") Burke, Deniece Diesel, Joanna Savannah Montana, Vee Verna Beernuts, Edna Electrozavod, Mrs. Pollywollydoodle, Annie ("Sixgun") Repetor, Bitchette, Regina Hamburger, Mary Constance Mouth, and Alicia the Angry Inch. A horrible hefty with chinchilla chin-hair known as Mrs. Titcomb came barrel-assing out of the toilets screaming with her shrill voice, "I do not fucking believe it! There are two drunken Pekinese-faced dwarfettes in one of the stalls in the lavatory desperately rogering each other with strapped-on crotch-rockets!"

"Getting an eyeful?" Ann Marie Tubb asked, licking the rim of her Dead Dog. "No big deal. I've seen places more colorful than the Sewing Circle. Boards, lumber, and timber are all different categories,

Lulu. Try to remember that, OK? It is merely a question of adjustment. The old vaudevillian Bert Williams was once asked what shoe size he wore. 'Ten,' he replied. 'But the 11s feel so good, I wear 12s.'"

The emergencied vocals continued up front, as with a whole series of power chords, the easiest thing to play that the audience would recognize as entertainment, the Liars broke into a two-song medley, "Baby It's Me" and "I'll Make It Up To You." "God, they suck," growled The Krauthammer, taking a moment grumpily to refix into another braid her hair thick as boat coir, twisting and rolling the coconut fibers. "Right," said Ann Marie Tubb, "plus they're not even original; tell me that song isn't a blatant plagiarism of Richie and the Renegades? Do you hear what I mean? They fucking stole it! And how out of it can you *get*?" She bent her eyes toward the band. "I've been listening to their pathetic covers of Al Caiola and Sergio Mendes and Johnny Pineapple and the Happy Hawaiians for an hour now and I'm about to shit thumbtacks!"

"I'd rather listen to my grandmother's volume albums of the Longines Symphonette, or Lawrence Welk and his North Dakota Fruit Gum Orchestra!"

"On 78 rpms!"

"Or Helen Reddy."

"What about the high school fife-and-drum corps from downtown Athol, the town named for a human part?"

"Awful."

"And that cheesy, wheezy Farfisa sound!"

"I never knew a single sane person who liked those unbearable big-haired, heavy metal bands. Remember Quiet Riot and Metallica and Mötley Crüe? Fucking mandrills!"

"Shitbox City!"

"How about The Butlers, those four unmusical oysterfaces, a family yet, with asses on them like boat barrows?"

"Shockpigs!"

"'Dad, when I grow up, I want to be a rock star,' mocked The Krauthammer, cracking a pretzel. "'Son, you can't have it both ways.'" Everyone screamed with laughter, except Laura who turned beet-red. They were scoring.

"'Excuse me, sir, but do you know 'The Road to Mandalay?'" It was Ann Marie Tubb. "'Why yes. Would you like me to sing it?' 'No, dickweed. I'd like you to take it.'" More screeches of cackling, derisive

laughter.

"I went to a concert last week. The Ventures," interjected Laura in all seriousness. "So schlocky. Surf meets lounge. It's, like, so polished and boring. I never really liked surf music that much, but thought I'd like to check it out, since Jeff managed to get me in for free." A long pause held, as all the clichés of the rock music maven sunk in. The women looked at her. *Jeff?* "Do you guys know Jeff Bummely of the Craven Slucks? Works in a record shop in Central Square? The show was sold out. It was full of thirty-, forty-, even fifty-somethings, you know, all the Boston rock people. Jeff—"

"Fuck Jeff," said The Krauthammer to Ann Marie Tubb, who said, "Jeff bites it!" Laura badly reddened and took a sip of her drink. The women smirked at each other behind her back. "I was only going to say he knows Jumbo Positano and was talking to him at the concert. The music guy at the *Phoenix*, you know? The *Boston Phoenix*? I know, it all sounds kind of lame-ass, but, still, I was talking to big Moe Coughlin, that biker-looking dude, and his scary sidekick, Sandy, who flashed her tits at Moe the time I met them before—"

"Hold it! *Hold it*!"

Funn and The Krauthammer exchanged doubtful glances. The sophomoric rigmarole was unbearable.

"Are you fucking for real?"

"Were you shipped in rolls or bags?" asked Ann Marie Tubb. "Jeff fucking this, Jeff fucking that? You sound loonier than a fucking college basketball coach! What, every time he calls, you bend over and grab your ankles? For what, a couple of free tickets? Disco records? A handful of CDs? His small dick? A 95-cent bag of drugstore candy?"

Mimicked The Krauthammer, cooing and making bunny mittens, "Jeffie-pooh is a wock star who pways the guitar gets widdle me in for fweeeee!"

"We don't go in for that shit, Lulu."

"Laura."

"Whatever," said Ann Marie Tubb.

"Rock groupies. Jesus."

"Bolo-alert—for losers!"

"Don't let the light shining out of his ass blind you too badly, OK, sister?"

"He works hard," said Laura. "The band has gigs everywhere. They travel."

"Hustle," said The Krauthammer. "The last vestige of a no-talent."

"How old are you, Teacup Tits? Aren't these guys fucking morons? Total shitwits? Space fruits without a cerebellum to the carload?" asked Vera Vagina. "You're a betty," said a fat woman sitting nearby wearing trollop-red gloves with rhinestone clumps dangling from her ears and a T-shirt that read *Support Cannibals: Eat Me*, leaning over to Laura. "A groupie who lifts her skirt for a backstage pass and a snootful of dope." The Krauthammer pointed to the Liars, the four would-be power-poppers on stage, who were at least a quarter-century past any arena-style aspirations, and with an obscene gesture—a quick masturbatory fist-shake, as if she were throwing dice—indicated the aging, raddled-looking lead singer with the puffy face at the mike. "That git up there rehashing all those rock platitudes for all these clueless customers read a book one time, right?" she said. "*A green one*!" The two women burst into screaming laughter. "Like your boyfriend, an aging rock star—talk about an oxymoron!"

"He's as thick as two short planks. You can tell."

"Third from the left on the evolution chart!"

"Doesn't he have to have his shoes marked L and R?" asked Ann Marie Tubb mockingly.

"Right, and keep the faucet painted red so that he won't scald himself in the shower."

"A dumbo," piped in a pretty little sapphonic from BU in a bell-shaped hat who majored in biology. "Fissures in the inferior parietal region. Deficiency of glial cells! Almost no neurons! A neuroanatomist would find the jar that holds it smaller than his brain!"

"I think he went to college," hesitantly offered Laura, pulling her nose.

"Best twelve years of his life," said Ann Marie Tubb.

"He can actually feed himself now!"

The women were now doubled over and whooping with whooping laughter.

"So how old *are* you?" asked The Krauthammer.

Laura answered, "Thirty-six. And you?"

"Sorry. I refuse to be judged like a racehorse or an automobile."

"What is it with these fuck-knuckles in rock that girls seem to like so much?" asked Ann Marie Tubb. "Big ringleted hair. Bracelets. Tats. Eyes like mica. Flat asses. Nothing in the upper stories but brain-lint.

What I find fascinating is that through some kind of bizarre cosmic anti-blessing or ambiguous providential gift they are lacking just enough intelligence to *see* what assholes they are. I'd really like to know what God had in mind creating such losers, that is, if She had anything in mind in the first place."

"Ask her," grunted The Krauthammer, jerking a thumb at a now diffident Laura.

"Jeff's a genius. At least he told me he was, and, like, I don't know, it may be true," declared Laura, perspiring, her sour body odor rising in the heat. "A *genius*?" exclaimed The Krauthammer with her crude, no-underpants laugh. "Is that why he works in a record shop?" Laura nervously twisted one of her tiny rings. Suddenly realizing the fatuity of her remark, she grinned sheepishly, her high gums gleaming red, and capitulated. "He writes songs. He knew Stiv Bators. He's a boulevard surrealist, groping for a breakthrough." "At his age?" asked Ann Marie Tubb. "His wife supposedly writes poetry," put in Laura. "I'm sure it sucks. So do his lyrics, to tell the truth, although I'd never tell him. He's . . . conflicted. He's, like, an alcoholic."

Laura's over-reliance on the word *like* gave her, she felt, youthful and engaging semiotic justification for all she said in the same way that in general academic and social circles nowadays the commonly repeated phrase *sort of*, used by the pretentious as a deliberating enclitic in virtually every sentence, somehow endows the speaker, or so he or she absurdly believes, with an aura of intellection and deliberation by way of a qualifying sense of wisdom.

"Oh of course. Otherwise he'd be Beethoven, right?" sneered The Krauthammer. Gulping her drink, she wiped her mouth. "That's the biggest front going."

"And you sleep with him?"

Came a pause. Laura smiled sheepishly.

"Just great," said Ann Marie Tubb. "Now let's have a moment of silence for your pride."

"And you eat with him?"

"What, pasta puttanesca?"

"Who isn't an alcoholic?" asked a big, imposing, seen-it-all, hard-faced woman with a man's name wearing a black leather vest and black slacks and a comb stuck in her hair who, humming "Kick Out the Jams," walked metatropically over to the table in long strides. She hovered, hands on her hips, and asked Laura, "You into golden show-

ers? Wrestling in pudding? Rim shots? Humpage? Tribadism? Finger-doodling? Carpet-munching? Butt on the helmet? Want to try some mod passion consummated on a tigerskin? Care to see me in wet satin? Wanna be T-bagged? Try the Dirty Sanchez? Do the Rusty Trombone? The San Antonio Reach-Around?"

"Say hello to Nigel Eigl," said Ann Marie Tubb, rising with a bow to introduce her friend and then reach over for a lewd, undisguised bumsqueeze.

"You look like a telephone operator," said Nigel Eigl to Laura, shaking her hand.

"Thanks a lot."

"He's *married*, shit-for-brains? And you're chasing this dork around for what? A bum with a bean?"

"That is soooo shady."

"And weak!"

"He came on to me."

"Then he puffballed you. Right?"

"You should give him a wood shampoo, with a rolling pin—or a sculpting mallet."

Nigel Eigl snatched her crotch, went cross-eyed, and satirically bleated at Laura as she imitated the great Timi Yoro,

> "I'm so huuuurt,
> To think that you lied to meee.
> So-oooo hurt,
> Way down deep inside of meee!"

A mulatress at a nearby table who with eyes violet from drink and wearing a leopard-spotted Christ-wrapped louver on her head stopped eating pieces from a candy necklace and leaned over to say, "Not seeing is lame, strawbody. Don't look is not only the oldest survival tactic in history but the biggest lie." At a table proximate to hers on the other side were gathered a group of F-to-Ms—transgendered women—sitting around a tall canister, the label of which stated "Contribute to GenderPAC." "Life is change," proclaimed one of the elder gorgons, adjusting her necktie and feeling slightly elated for her deep observation. At her clavicle she wore a lesbian jewelry motif pin called a labrys. "I agree," put in a goggle-eyed woman named Polly Pandowdy, a hideous hairball oracle from Wisconsin in thrift-shop clothes

and Timberlake boots. "The thing about moving is you're not in the same place but in a different one. Do you get what I mean?" "I do, I *do*," chimed in Sandy "The Bush" Hartigan, a big woman with severe dragon breath and the wide, upturned nostrils—two huge holes—of Horace Horsecollar. They were all sitting in a circle, a tiny umgebung, as dried and fussy and unbewitching as felt ferns, without a single seed or flower or fruit, discussing acid reflux and fat euphoria and cellulite and foundation primers and eye serums and various women's issues like recontouring traditional feelings, burdens of menopause, the problems of peeing in foreign countries, and so forth. "I don't know. I avoid life by traveling. That's how I avoid male demons," said another. It was the remark of a regular there, a giggling transplant from Oregon named Hope, an empty-headed faded blonde wearing granny glasses, a turquoise necklace and ring, and a yellow *Take Back the Night* T-shirt. "I love to travel. We"—she gestured sweetly to her jut-jawed friend in a black and red bull mackinaw— "got married at Saint Isidore's church on the Isle of Lesbos. Of course they call it Mytilene."

"Men suck gas pipes."

"Who needs them?" said Ann Marie Tubb.

"Wonder Woman didn't," ventured Hope. She giggled into her hand. "Did you know that Wonder Woman, Princess Diana, had two mommies? She was not only born of the virgin Hippolyta *but also* the goddess who breathes life into that little clay statue. Now does that tell you something?"

"Last time I saw that much turquoise was on the cover of a Rita Coolidge album," said The Krauthammer.

But Laura wanted to talk. She had the book on the hated wife of this rock singer and badly wanted to share it. "Look, Jeff and his wife are separated. The bitch left him to go study poetry and from what I've been told doesn't even want him back. She visits Cambridge occasionally. I saw her one morning in Central Square, coming out of that old yellow-brick building where he lives, a dirty blonde, short and dumpy with splayed feet and saddlebags like this, and I shot her a fucking look. I should have—" The bile of rising jealousy, of pure fury, constricting her throat, made Laura almost speechless and green and unimportant and ugly and small. Growing warm and wrathful, she angrily took off her jacket. She swallowed her bile. "She must be something special if he is so in thrall to her. He told me that a lot of people are attracted to her."

"'*In thrall*'!" asked Ann Marie Tubb, laughing a wide, wet, red laugh. "In thrall to her, did you say? Do your hear yourself? What a pussy phrase!" She loudly sucked her drink. "What did you expect the poor married bastard to be, *not* in thrall? Isn't she his wife, zipperhead?"

An embarrassed silence held.

"Well?" asked The Krauthammer.

"Don't be nervous," said Ann Marie Tubb. "Sit back. Relax. I can tell it's been a long time since you've had to be interesting."

"Or awake," added The Krauthammer, having perfected with her friend the artful zing of call and response vocals.

"A penny for your thoughts."

The Krauthammer said from the side of her mouth, "And 20 cents for your body."

"Wake up! We're still here!"

Laura went rigidly stick-thinish.

"Go on," prodded Ann Marie Tubb.

"She writes poetry, goes to readings, came from someplace in Hawaii or something. A fucking wilma named Juliette! God, I wanted to egg her house! Probably thinks she's Emily fucking Dickinson. Can you fucking believe it? I'd like to nail that bitch, and, you know something, just wait, I intend to. I promise you, you can take it to the bank." Laura grew pale and her voice sounded green and strangulated and distant as her pouting lip lengthened. She had been harboring for months now a deeply irrational hatred for this woman and now that she had mentioned her enemy's unbelievably stupid name aloud, she was already hatching elaborate plans to gaslight her with midnight telephone calls, leaving all sorts of crazy, obscene messages and threats. It was a ploy that she had used in the past against other rivals with great success. It had worked against her cheap prick of a husband and the two whores he lived with.

"Are you from Lesbos?" asked Hope from Oregon. "I like tough talk. Wanna backrub?"

"You have an upfront mouth," said Nigel Eigl, "but no balls. I'm frank. Live with it. I could tell you were no Wendy O. Williams or Poly Styrene or Theo Lunachick the minute I laid eyes on you. You need leadership, someone like me. What's the largest household object you've ever had inside you?"

A pretty bald girl with a tough chick by her side walked into the club. "I like your veal, scaloppini," said the drunken black woman.

Ann Marie Tubb pointed over to weird unshaven Larry Clucker in his frock and red wig at the far table and told Nigel Eigl, "If you want some kink-o-rama, why don't you take that loony tunes into the loo for a quick hundred and fifty. I hear he's into toilet games."

"He looks like Pharaoh's mother's mummy," said Nigel Eigel. "I mean, I have some pride." But she sashayed over to the table and said, "Ever had a Cleveland steamer? You into rodeo sex? Hoopoe-walking? Butt-plug ring-toss? How about a Pittsburgh platter? Or some Strawberry Shortcake? I have a glass table up my apartment. You prefer a quick blumpkin? Some ATM—ass-to-mouth configuroso?"

"I prefer e-films. Do them?"

"Go buy a hoop."

Someone wearing black nail polish who had draped tons of rosaries around her neck also came up to the pretty young corkhead with close-shaven skull and long dark magnetic eyes and said, "I'm Sandra Monica." "I'm Patchouli," replied the girl, "and I'm with her, Betty Butters," she added, pointing to the fierce black-eyed womandrake who was with her and who was shaped like a sham pilsner-glass, top-heavy with tits, bulkitude, and was wearing a shawl and a hat like a banana bicycle-seat to which was pinned four button-pins that read *Lavender Menace, Adam Was a Rough Draft, The Best Way to A Man's Heart Is Through His Chest*, and *No Man Is a Failure: He Serves As a Bad Example.* "You look like a humpgoblin," grizzled Betty Butters, making a fist and stepping belligerently between Patchouli and Sandra Monica to say, "I'll rip you a new asshole. How's that?" She had a voice like a man pulling his foot out of a pail of mud. "I don't mean it? Try me."

"You're a truckball!"

"You're a blow monkey!"

"Eat chain, Guido!"

"You're a battle-cruiser hawk!"

"I am a lesbian, not a woman," declaimed her adversary, closing her eyes for dignity, and with swinging rosaries climbed onto the table and quoted from a poem by Elana Dykewomon:

> "A tit is not a tit
> A breast is a bellows that forges
> our rage
> down here on earth
> to each other

without the right names."

"I'd like to throttle you with my black motorcycle touring gloves."

"Throttle this," said Betty Butters, insolently grabbing her crotch.

"I love violent weather," said Hope from Oregon.

"Lesbians do."

"I don't. Well, sometimes I do," said a nearby gynander, tree tall and wearing a derby and a brown necktie.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Ethylene." She stuck out a hand no one took. "C_2H_4 to my friends."

"And?" asked Betty Butters assuming a bring-it-on stance.

"I'm a Third Wave liberated bisexual diet-free feminist who is into control, high salaries, physical reciprocity, access, gender pride, mono-sex bathrooms, privileges like males have, and big jeans."

"You cover all the bases."

"So do your jeans."

The music had grown loud. In one corner, where two lesbians were theatrically allopreening in a corner, the lips of the kissing couple formed a single ugly snout. A toothy woman in an ocellated sweater and elf boots, rocking by drunk, stopped and asked for money. "Take a walk, overbite," said Ann Marie Tubb. One of the old GenderPAC gorgons in huge mom jeans said, "I once saw Nazimova at the 8080 Club!" "I'm impressed, but tell that to Martha Dumptruck over there," said Ann Marie Tubb, pointing to Betty Butters. "And to all these other ancient wiggle-waggling, hocus-pocusing third-sex suffragettes and creepy museum dodos. They couldn't care less." "I have an Equity card," said a lady with a dyed black snaky hairdo—twists of guncurls and bizarro hammers—who looked like Osa Munson playing Mother Gin-Sling in *The Shangai Gesture*. "I was an actress myself," boasted another brazen lounge indigene there with big rings and a bum as big as a woman golfer's "—in Hollywood." I played a jitterbugging ingénue in the 1940's *Dance, Girl, Dance*, a low grade-B crypto sapphonic melodrama about the private lives of chorus girls. I was gorgeous. I had tits like new lightbulbs. I roomed with Fay Bainter. I was photographed with Van Johnson at the Mocambo in a fox chubby that was the very same tint as my mahogany coiffure." She beamed. "I banged the gong, twice with Victor Mature." The Krauthammer nudged Ann Marie Tubb and quipped out of the side of her mouth, "Oh, so *that*'s what

happened to Baby Jane!" "She looks seven years older than dirt," said Ann Marie Tubb, comically going semi-cross-eyed and turning her big face rubbery like Suik-O, the gigantic dance mask of a foolish drunken American as projected by the native Japanese.

"I've been everywhere," giggled Hope from Oregon, "from the Egyptian in Portland to the Ranch in Houston, from P-town to Jackson Heights, from Bernal Heights in San Francisco to Park Slope to all the gay New York ghettos." "Like the Cubby Hole in New York City?" queried the blonde with the door-knocker earrings in the *I Love Djibouti* T-shirt as she quietly maneuvered over to pretty, young, bald Patchouli. "What about the Naked Oysters in San Francisco?" "Or the Muffdive?" asked a big, hydrocephalic woman in hobnail boots holding a cup that bore the slogan *Don't Tell Me About It*, "where underneath a papier palm tree I once got gamahuched by a group of girl-munchkins from a road company of *The Wiz*." "I used to go pre-clubbing at the Squat & Gobble in Sinquo Frinquo," interposed Nigel Eigl, "and then on to the Wild Side West and Spanky's and Dottie's True Blue Café over on Jones Street. You want dungeons and dragons; try the Power Exchange on Harrison. Slings and showers? Mm-*mm*!" "I prefer the Osento Baths," said the mulatress. "And Mary Nurse's." "Tuck it," replied Nigel Eigl, angry. "I personally like the Doughnut Rack in L.A.," said another. The swaying androgyne with raccoon-ringed eyes in the trollop-red gloves asked, "How about Julie's on 58th Street?" "I think so," said Hope. "Top of the building?" "Nope. Basement. Piano bar. I nominate it for Barbaralee Diamondstein-Spielvogel's Historic Landmark Preservation Center in Manhattan!" "Go to Womontown in Kansas City," blurted the tall Baby Doll chick. "Daisy-chain heaven! I once hefty-bagged a real looker I took in the back room who had just come in for a drink out of a traffic jam. Glazed the ham." She gave a knowing look. "A stranger. And irked a bit. To me, anger is the total drive of desire, with the added co-ingredients of lust and inferiority. Swallow your firecrackers so that your hair comes out in bangs! I don't deny it helps of course, that I consider womyn the way most idiotic directors in Hollywood regard European accents: interchangeable. My favorite frankly is right here in Boston on Mondays—leather night at the Fruit Loops, 90 Worry Street. Wanna go?" "Only if there's a bitchin' open bar, girlfriend," said Hope to Raccoon-Eyes.

Meantime, the two women who were engaged in the extended gourmandizing kiss-sequence in the far corner paused to look up and

inquire in unison, "Ever been to Cherry Grove on Fire Island? Out on the sand spit?" "I'd rather hump Cherry Ames, Student Nurse," said a woman who looked exactly like Ignace Jan Paderewski, her electric hair blown out into a wind-ball. "Remember those children's books, *Cherry Ames, Island Nurse*; *Cherry Ames, Senior Nurse*; *Cherry Ames, Dude Ranch Nurse*?" "*Cherry Ames, Sexy Skinhead*," said the blonde in the *I Love Djibouti* T-shirt, and, unobserved, pinched Patchouli's pert little bottom. Continued Paderewski, "Whenever I saw those cover illustrations of her in that crisp uniform and nurse's cap with that rosy, almost flush complexion of hers, looking so vibrant? Let me tell you something, I used to cream!"

Then from out of nowhere, a totally drunken gynoid with shaved pink hair and big Christmas bulbs for earrings madly somersaulted over a bar-stool onto a table and dragged along her schrumpy-looking girlfriend who was the spitting image of Nikko, King of the Winged Monkeys, and, flying expressly in the face of Proverbs 20:1, bellowed, "I agree with the former *New York Magazine* editor Mrs. Frances Lear, when with her characteristic good taste she boldly announced for all of the twenty-first century to hear, 'A woman making love to another woman is without clutter! It is also egalitarian!'" Everybody shrilly laughed and wildly applauded, especially Sandy "The Bush" Hartigan who was laughing so hard she snorted beer down her set of huge porcine nostrils.

"I want to clutter *you* up," lewdly whispered the blonde in the *I Love Djibouti* T-shirt and chartreuse leather pants to pretty Patchouli when Betty Butters was not looking. "I had a photosexual relationship with a girl in Manhattan who looked like that strapping Tura Satana in Russ Meyer's *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, and I swear to God you look as deliciously kinky! My name is Edie Mene. I'm a lawyer. I'm rich." She smiled and slipped the impressionistic young girl one of her business cards that read "Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Upharsin, Attorneys," and said, "Call me. We'll go to New York."

"But I came here with —"

"Don't worry about Donna Diesel over there going commando on you, all right? I'll sue both cheeks of that cow's ample buttocks and still end up with one of them."

The woman with the dark lipstick whom everybody was studiously ignoring meanwhile kept revolving about and repeating to her reflection in a wall-mirror, "Call me Florian. I am not Brenda anymore. Call

me Florian."

"What is she a *fruit* now?"

"She's thorny."

"With bristles."

"And smells!"

"Why not?"

"I sing at Henrietta Hudson's on Hudson Street under the name of Ruth Viminal," interjected the theater directrix, making a backward vulgar-fingered waggle to her nose ring. She took a deep slug of beer from a long-neck and sourly looked at Laura. "So what's with the short-it-out pout?" Suddenly Ms. Old Hollywood reaching out with a long-nailed, heavily ringed finger began to outline a mystic sign on Laura's extended hand, which Laura proceeded to yank back contemptuously. "Innocence may be all right for those that got it," said the sibyl, grabbing her palm, "but you ain't not, do you get me? Innocent." She grabbed her hand again as if on some dark hunch. "By the way, are you a seamstress? I just got a cosmic whiff of danger. Listen to me. Beware thread."

Laura ignored her. She began to think that film director John Waters was correct when he said, "All lesbians in Baltimore look like Johnny Cash." Baltimore, Billings, Boston, what was the difference? They were bitches. Suddenly, the toothy woman grabbed Patchouli's bum. "Go hump a hoopoe!" said an infuriated Betty Butters, pulling Patchouli away, who bumped into Nigel Eigl. "You into massages? Chocolate games? Leg waxing? Tongue acrobatics? Bum booming?" flirtily asked Nigel Eigl. "What about a messy cake fight?" Patchouli put on a pair of sunglasses shaped like alien eyes and only stared back. "I have an idea. What about a creative colonic? Meet me later at Jacques' bar, OK? Behind the Radisson." The Krauthammer, nudging Nigel Eigel, smiled and whispered, "She's five-by-five. Toasted." The theater directrix put her face an inch from Laura and asked, "Pathetic much, slim? Suck my labia majora!" Laura with a small alcoholic buzz exasperatedly stood up and asked The Krauthammer and Ann Marie Tubb if they happened to know Jeff from the record shop. "I know *men*. That ain't enough?" Laura nevertheless began tediously recounting for the benefit of the two women and several proximate eavesdroppers a bitter updated account of Jeff's refusal to take her to New Haven. "I suppose I really should see through him. But this guy has really turned my head. What can I say? I've been sleeping with him. I wanted especially

to sleep with him the night of his birthday, May 14, but the bastard fucking refused."

"May 14! Why the shitball's—"

"A Taurus," sneered the Krauthammer. Ann Marie Tubb interposed. "I figured. Always people with big wide mouths. Talkers. Singers. Politicians. Sportcasters," she said. "All blabbermouths! He also wears a lot of scarves, I bet. Right? That's another real Taurus thing." "I know a Leo who's a real blabber," said Laura. "Jealous?" asked Ann Marie Tubb. "Leo is the most creative sign of the Zodiac: people with that sign can write, act, paint, make speeches, compose music, order in Chinese, and so forth. I would suggest, let me add, that a Leo would instantly hate you. By the way, when's your birthday?" "December the 20th," said Laura. "Oh Christ!" exploded The Krauthammer, "with Aries rising. Plodders. Burrowers. Stubborn pursuers of things. God help us when one of you gets a fucking mission!" And when Laura provided the exact time of day she was born, upon being asked, The Krauthammer exclaimed, "Say no more! Pisces rising, sun in Capricorn! Of course you've got problems with the pelvic issues! But it's even worse. You want money, status, security. You're a pragmatist and would kick anything aside that gets in your way. No one is more coldly opportunistic than people of this sign! Your sign is a cross between a cash register and a cockroach, your worry, how can I 'capitalize'—a big Capricorn word. I mean, anything for cold hard cash, including lots of biological interludes, especially going down for 'milk mustaches,' I'm afraid. *Plus*, you're emotionally shut down. Stubborn. *Very* stubborn. Pushy, niggardly. Wait, not niggardly—plain fucking cheap, face it! A creature of bad parenting, beyond that, and you take a long time to forgive. How does that compute?"

Nigel Eigl said, "She's got no balls. I can tell."

"I heard that," said Laura.

"What, that you're fucking meringue who can be piped into shape by any pastry bag that comes along?" asked Nigel Eigl, crossing her boots.

"And don't forget of course you want to be loved," interrupted the drunken black woman with the candy necklace. "But I told you, not seeing is lame, Strawbody. Ain't gonna happen. Ain't no *way* gonna happen." A heavy woman with a crimped Assyrian haircut wearing a lacy camisole and glossy plastic trousers with nail-head tigers on the rear who was dancing in place with a dwarfish coked-out mutt of a

lady in hot rodeo colors with trousers slopping over the top of her Western shoes said, "He don't love you." Laura who had no pride moaned, "Why doesn't he love me? Why doesn't he care? His wife doesn't love him. I've spent a lot of time waiting for him. In a way, he's held me down. I can't take it anymore. I've started sleeping over once in a while. He even *asked* me to sleep over last night, but by then it was 2:30 A.M., so what's the big deal?"

"You're desperate, huh?"

"'He's held me down,'" mocked the coked-out dwarf. "The dumb blonde of social excuses."

"Dorothy Dumbbell," said Ann Marie Tubb, "linchpin of the anti-cloning argument."

"Who's desperate?"

"Two's desperate," goofily mimicked The Krauthammer in a sing-sing repetition.

Betty Butters shouted out, "Dyslexic she's!" Everyone hooted and cackled.

"Lysdexic, did you say?"

"Hey, who called, 'Coming are the British'?" shouted the theater directrix. "Paul *Reverse*!"

"What, do you put crystal suppositories up your ass?"

"Let's do a 'rabbit intervention' and take away her vibrator."

"You interested in fisting?"

Laura blushed.

"What about vibrators? Toys?" It was Nigel Eigl putting in her two cents. "Suction-cup jelly dicks? Slip-dogging with a dildo? Artificial breast jelquing? Thumbfumbling? Tantric pansexualism?"

"Bring Jeff," said Ann Marie Tubb.

"Animal-print bondage? Yoni wrestling? Vaginal barbells? Being spanked with bananas? Mainstream gonzo smut? Superevil slim-jimming? Raspberry rings? I've got a cabinet full of smart-balls, a G-spotter deluxe, two 'whippets,' a 9-inch flexivibe, an orifish—the most comfortable bum-stopper on earth—crystal probes, a Wonder Wand, and a Fukuoka 9000 that fits over the tip of my little finger." She snorted. "You need to exercise your pubococcygeus muscle!"

Two crones, duck-faced and phlebitic, jumped in. One said to the gathered group, "Don't bother wasting your breath—she has eyes for guys." "'You who care only about saving others,' asked weird Kundry of Parsifal," mocked the other, "'how can you refuse to help me?'"

The first crone, shaking her head, tapped her temple while pitifully looking at Laura and said, "*Despoblado.*"

"Unpopulated," said the other.

"Dumber than an orange road-cone!"

Laura Warholic was angry. But the women neither mediated their feelings nor modulated their voices.

"Sparkle, Shirley, sparkle!"

"Laura," corrected Laura, frostily.

"My name is Crille," said a boanthrop with a basket of flash-frozen hair stepping forward, looking for attention, a strapping, fat-assed, moose-thighed fifty-year-old hump with a low-bred Virginia accent and a hoop-world of porcelain jewelry stacked along one hairy arm. She might have been moderately attractive but for her thighs, which were indistinguishable from her hippo-huge calves that went straight into her feet without the intervention of ankles.

"That's a *name*?"

"So what?" said Ann Marie Tubb. "Listen to popular music sometime—so are Frenesi, Amapola, Poinciana, Be Bop a Lula, Bony Moroni, Ciribirribim, and, yes, Rama Lama Ding Dong! All are women's names. Can you fucking believe that?"

"I can't," said a doubtful gym-buddha in sloppy sweatpants, a short woman with angry eyes, who moved in, along with a whole passel of other fanny mechanics, quiminals, hedge queens, shitsofrenics, hose-monsters, jaywankers, labiologists, procrasturbators, hufflers, I-Have-a-Screamers, no lobes, and Chinese "helicopter pilots."

"It's true! It's true! Try to find *those* names in the Bible! Tonjah, source of the city of Tangier, is taken from a woman's name!"

Ethylene rakishly tapped her derby over an eye and said, "Did I tell you that they call me C_2H_4?"

"Architect I. M. Pei's first name is Ieoh!" shouted a youngish woman, flocky-haired like Bonita Granville wearing a *Run from Fear, Run from Rear* T-shirt.

A quiminal squealed, "I'm an architecture major at Harvard."

"I want to hump your hair," said The Krauthammer.

"In Haiti, I knew a girl named Oxygen and a yard boy named Telephone."

"Edith Head's husband, a Twentieth-Century art director, was named Wiard Ihnen. *Wiard Ihnen*! Talk about wee-ard! Ahem, theirs was a lavender marriage, I'm told."

"A Gillette blade."

"Meaning?"

"Cuts both ways."

"Then there is Mytyl, the little bluebird girl—remember Shirley Temple?—a name that sounds like a cough syrup," continued Ann Marie Tubb. "The world was invented, let me tell you! One of the feuding Hatfields was named Tennis. Three Catholic popes were named Telesphorus, Soter, and Pontian! I had an affair with a woman named Okra whom I met at the Meow Mix, a dyke bar in the East Village. Or was it the Squeeze Box? Whatever. I remember driving through England once to a place called Zennor—I'm not making this up—by way of Botallack, Carn Kenidjack, and Woon Gumpus! In England, mind you, an odd country that is so insular, so xenophobic, that to pronounce a foreign word there, even the words *pizza* or *Dubonnet*, is considered almost as bad a crime as child molesting!"

"Jesse James's mother was named Zerelda."

"What is it about old mothers? Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's was called Nilpah!"

"Was she ashamed of it?" asked a diffident young woman with a white faux-hawk.

"Quaintenance Eaton was a friend of Ned Rorem's," declared the theater directrix.

"Remember Beverly Aadland, actor Errol Flynn's teenage chippie? When she grew up, she had a daughter whom she named Aadlandia."

"Adeline?"

"Aadlandia! Aadlandia Aadland!"

"Well, Virginia Woolf's actual baptismal name was Adeline. Adeline Woolf!"

"Was she ashamed of it?"

"Oh shut up, Geronimo!"

"Speaking of A's, actress Norma Shearer's older sister was named Athole."

"They call me 'The Bush,'" said Sandy "The Bush" Hartigan. "Want to know why?" Nobody did.

"I love Mormon names," put in Betty Butters, who was a compulsive reader of not only Amazonian literature but Latter Day Saints lore. "Orson, Hyrum, Parley, Heber. Oh, and don't forget Nehi, the orange drink! That's just the men. The women? Try Vilate, Thirza,

Permelia, and Lettice! What do you think Hyrum and Vilate's melon-headed kid would be named—*Spacebubble*?"

"How about Moron?"

"Or Fuxstix!"

"You a Mormon?" inquired a big female monstro with muscular calves fitted with ankle hose, spit curls embellishing a receding forehead, and a grim, medieval biker-wristlet rosaried with Viking spikes.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Me!"

"So?"

"You a Mormon?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"An ex-Christian. Got a problem with it? Raised in Maine by two wacko evangelicals who nightly sent me to my room to read Scripture until I was cross-eyed!" She burped. "In the brief New Testament book of Philemon—only one page long, take a look sometime—in a single *paragraph* you come across the ridiculous named Apphia, Onesimus, Archippus, and Epaphras!"

"Because I had frizzy hair as a little girl," said Sandy "The Bush" Hartigan sadly, to no one.

Ms. Hollywood with the rings said, "David Niven's wife was named *Hjordis*—talk about a fucking Scrabble winner! Could a person make that up? And Louis Jourdain's Quique!" Betty Butters bowed mockingly, making a leg like an eighteenth-century courtier. "*Quique, say hello to Hjordis*!"

"Fucking jilts!"

"William Brewster of the Plymouth Colony had a son named "Wrestling."

"Trout Fishing in America is a person's name, too," said The Krauthammer, halving a pretzel in a single bite of a salt-water crocodile. "I wouldn't name a fucking monkey that."

"That's what I *would* name a monkey."

"What would you name a doormat?"

Crille pointed at Laura. "Her."

Everybody stared at her.

"What, I've seen Jeff fifteen or twenty times in five months," said Laura defensively, "and he still doesn't know where I live." She looked suddenly sorrowful. "He has yet to come over to my place. Something

is wrong about that."

"Wrongwrongwrong," echoed the theater directrix, into her third drink and looking something like a heavily doped Chinese illusionist.

"Doyee!" said Ann Marie Tubb, mocking Laura's stupidity and criss-crossing her eyes with lollygagging nuttiness while placing an imaginary gun to her head and mock-firing it with her index finger. The Krauthamaer's cigarette-whiskey laugh exploded into a long hacking cough. "'Order in the court,' the judged yelled. 'OK,' said Laura, 'I'll have a ham sandwich on rye!'"

Everybody burst into laughter.

"I know he likes me, but I guess he doesn't love me." She was waiting to see what everyone said. "You sound like Swami Beyondananda: obvious, stupid, wooden, and lame," interdicted Mrs. Shvitz. Laura folded and refolded her arms. In the heat her hair was looking as disheveled as a rambutan. "I guess he doesn't need a Yoko Ono around, especially one he isn't married to. Namely, me."

"Yoko Ono? *You?* Omigod, pick up your face! And that makes him what?" asked Ann Marie Tubb, yanking off her blue-jean jacket and adjusting her *I Go From Zero to Bitch in 2.5 Seconds* T-shirt. "A fucking Beatle? Don't flatter yourself. You look like a sick Egyptian chicken on a hot rock!"

"I don't think I'm that unattractive," said Laura.

The Krauthammer sneered, "IYD, baby."

"Meaning?"

"In your dreams," said a hulking waitress with her collar up in a high cone and a water-feathered duck's-ass haircut shining like the pelt of a wet seal, who swiftly swept the table with a rag and took away the empties.

"And your point is?"

"You have a point for a head."

"'*He even asked me to sleep over*,'" mimicked The Krauthammer with merciless accuracy. Laura's nonresistance only seemed to increase the brutality of the attackers. "You're a loser, you're a doormat, you're white bread. A parrot perch. Sloppy seconds. What, every morning does he takes you out for a walk on a string?"

"Get a life, Lorna."

"Laura."

"Whatever."

"Look, you got waxed. Face it."

"It's simple."

"It sucks to be you, OK?" said The Krauthammer, shrugging indifferently.

"Relationships are about one personality trumping another," said Ann Marie Tubb, "nothing else. Two play. One loses. Automatically. Like that predatory dyke over there and Betty Butters. One wins. The other takes the pipe. One has to lose. Most of the time, one wants to lose. Chance rules. Wallis Simpson trumped Edward VIII. Jean Harlow trumped Paul Bern. Napoleon trumped Josephine. Dalilah trumped Samson. FDR trumped his wife, Ele-o-ner," she said, sardonically making buck teeth. "When one gets the intro, it's outro for the other. It is all about Copperheads, yellow-dog Democrats, quislings. Fathers; daughters. Mothers; sons. Uncles; nephews. Right down the line. Don't talk to me about leverage. And definitely not about love. Love is a contest. Arm-wrestling. Chess. Parcheesi. Mumblety-Pegs. King—or Queen—of the Mountain. And the whole thing is tainted with corruption. Trust me. Slavery. A woman regarded as property is automatically a doll."

"Who needs men anyway?

"Cucumbers don't go limp."

"Judith Krantz, my favorite novelist," interjected a lipstick-smeared dwarf satyriconette, "has never had a single female character in any of her books experience a multiple orgasm because she doesn't believe such a phenomenon exists."

"Amazing, isn't it? Almost as interesting as the phenomenon of a low-Epsilon-minus writing popular novels."

A monstrously fat young woman named Grace Piewheel with pig-nostrils and bedraggled long hair in a billowing wrap-around-the-universe-dress and sneakers stepped forward and said, "Women hate men. Men know it. So? Adrienne Rich who claims that men are not necessary for women to get pregnant asserts that heterosexuality is not natural. Rita Mae Brown thinks women do not naturally desire men. We studied this at Mount Holyoke and all believe it. Don't you read books?"

"She looks at the pictures."

"I admit it," said Laura. "I'm probably being used. Rock stars get lots of girls."

Ann Marie Tubb squeezed her hands in theatrical despair and lifting up her hair in two extremist horns moaned, "She Was Bred in Old

Kentucky, But She's Just a Crumb up Here!"

"Bloom where you're planted."

"Rot where you're stuck."

"I want to get you some books," said Grace Piewheel bulking maw-crammed into the group and looking for all her fleshy chins and flabby arms like Rubens's *Maria Arrives at Marseilles*. She smelled of margarine.

The Krauthammer nudged Ann Marie Tubb and, nodding, asked, "Who's the puffy puckers?"

"Get a hysterectomy," advised Betty Butters, indifferently cross-slapping her palms in a gesture of finality as she turned to Laura. "I got rid of my baby box. Cost me two Gs. Into the garbage with it. A buck, a button, what are you out? Why women need those things is beyond me.

"I wasn't always a player. I was doing the do for five years with a low-IQ cop with love handles from Revere named Johnny Sunoco. An '85' they call it on the force. He had a cock like a Gonzales—a black-jack. A magnum. A maypole. I used to bite all the buttons off his shirt during sex frenzies. I'm talkin' freak-o-rama, OK? I admit it. But like all guys he turned out to be scum in the end and a quattrigamist to boot, the fucking psycho hose-beast. He had crabs so many times he could have qualified as an aquarium. I should have taken an ax-handle to his colon. Now I'll only talk to a man if I'm holding a steak knife."

"That's better, sweetheart. Dykes hate chicks with 'eyes for guys.'"

"And who gave you that expensive shawl?"

"The fat cop? For services?" snidely asked Sandra Monica, twisting one of her dress rosaries.

"Why, you envious, Rubberbutt? It's a pashmina shawl, try. Knit from fur that grows on the testicles of goats."

"Too bad they don't use the testicles!" barked the dwarfette with a griglike guffaw.

"If they can send a man to the moon, why can't they send them all?"

Grace Piewheel asked, "But how can I send you books if I don't know where you live, Lola?"

"Laura."

Mrs. DeKooning with teeth, half-plastered, again screamed, "What is the area of a trapezium whose diagonal is 130 feet and the perpendiculars to the diagonal respectively 56 feet and 70 feet?" She drew imaginary figures in the air. "A man without an erection, thank God."

It was *Maria Arriving at Marseilles* again: "So what's your address? Write it down."

Laura who sat there quietly listening to the strange chat like a bat-eared fox laughed then she shrugged but wrote it down.

"I love your adorable little bangle bracelets. They give me a wide-on! You want to come over, have coffee, and get tied up?" It was Nigel Eigl again, squeezing one of her studded wristlets and turning to fat-assed Crille and her jumbo teeth. "You into felching? Rug-chewing? Carnosexuality? Hortiphilia? Glory holes? Barking at the moon? Golden banana splits? Wanna do some body-knitting? The open-cross lattice? Zigzag and fagot? Tufted rosette? Knotted trellis? Or," she grinned, "how about me giving you a Crisco wristwatch?" Nigel Eigl bent to Laura's face. "How about you? Want some glutobasiation? A pudendacure? A bit of tittlebat? Are you into axillism? Bukkake? Or would you prefer an atomic sit-up where, suddenly unblindfolded, you have to identify whosoever's ass it is that's in your face? That would be *my* guess. I notice you have unbarbered arms. I myself hate too much body hair. So why don't you go buff it? They now sell hair-removing buffing mitts for women, you know? Each one lasts as long as a razor blade. Which reminds me. Want me to teach you how to do the 'love glove': the double trigger?" Nigel Eigl eagerly rubbed her hands. "First, you place one thumb—"

"Forget it."

"You twist the—"

"*Forget it.*"

"You got issues with us?" asked Ms. Hollywood.

"John Waters claims that sex is always best only when you're confused."

"How about some G.B.H.?" asked Nigel Eigl.

Laura frowned.

Ann Marie Tubb shrugged. "Grievous bodily harm. It's fun."

"Tell you what," said Laura. "I'll watch."

"From what I've heard," said The Krauthammer to Laura, "you should be watching your checkbook for starters, since you're already on your way to becoming the high priestess of Loserville, you who are so super-geeked on bands. I heard Warholic is suing your lame donkey-ass for major money. He hates you big-time. Apparently you papered his neighborhood, right, claiming that fatso was impotent? A limp noodle?"

"The fucker *is* impotent," grumped Laura, who nevertheless blanched from fear and in a sudden rush of anxiety was briefly overcome with heat from an incipient case of diarrhea and her voice began to tremble. She twisted her rings. "But who told you?" she snapped. Fear rattled in her voice, a trembling rale of apprehension that she had been suddenly found out. "Ratnaster? Mutrux? Gnorm with his knobby skull like a warped gourd and jug ears? That fucking toad Discknickers? Warholic?" It's because that fat *pistache* can't get it up that he has to get even. Fuck nuns over, she thought. Squeeze his mother's dugs for a nickel. She plucked at the bushes under her moist, wide-stained armpit. She stood up and sat down. She began nervously shredding a napkin. The music was giving her a splitting headache. She began to snatch at her inner loins. Why didn't that band stop *playing so loud*?

"It's that prick Warholic."

"Who else could it be?" asked Ann Marie Tubb. "They're all swill at the office, of course. Although, much as I dislike that weirdo Eugene Eyestones, he is the only supporter you have there, Lena."

"Laura."

"I heard at work—but don't hold me to it—that with another deadbeat who owed him money, fat Warholic in his vindictiveness sold the debt to a Mafia figure who took the sucker for a ride. You dig? Ended up fish food. You want to get two in the hat? Last year I borrowed a grand from him to put down for my shitbox of a blue Chevy, delayed, what, a couple of extra weeks paying the bastard back, and I thought he was going to rip my throat out. He's a Jew, you know."

"I'll sue the monster *for* you," said the blonde with the door-knocker earrings. "Here's my card. Get some business-savvy."

"I'd have chopped his balls off and salted them. Braided them!" said hulking Nigel Eigl.

"Let the fucker *prove* it was me!" said Laura with false bravado. Oh Jesus, she thought, if Warholic traced the leaflets to her, she was dead! She knew how litigious and revengeful he was, how cruel, deranged, and bullying he had been with her in San Francisco. A waitress with a pigtail greasier than a Chihuahua sack came over and began clearing bottles and wiping the table. "I'll sue him," snapped Laura, whose anger put a hoot or wail in her voice that always had something of the tremolo of a yodel. "I'll sue all of them." She grabbed her jacket. "I'm going. I've got to go. I'm getting the fuck out of here."

At that moment, a dark jaw and red wig went rocking by in the

nightmarish form of transvestitured Larry Clucker, prissily wearing a boat-tarp-blue neckerchief and purple pumps. "What's *that*?—Charlie's Aunt?" Nigel Eigl asked. "He, she, or it? He looks like he was sent for and couldn't go and then went and wasn't wanted!" "It's the King of Queens," said Ann Marie Tubb. "He works at *Quink* with the rest of us." "God, he has the skin-color of toilet porcelain." Ann Marie Tubb shook her head and said, "The rectum is the grave."

"Is he wearing moulage?"

"He makes Rosie the Riveter look girlie!"

"I like drag," said Polly Pandowdy to the mulatress. "Joan of Arc was the pioneer drag king."

"You masturbate a lot, don't you?" boldly said Miss Sandra Monica to Laura. "Buff your helmet, right? I can tell. You've got pasty skin. Pallor. Bublets for tits. And bushy scrubbing-brush pubes, I bet—not fleece. Winterbush, right? And, look, damp hands. Ever hear of bronzing powder, kitten? I'll bet you're also too wide. From going too far with your bunny! I can tell you're the grateful type with the male set, right? Why, because they spring for dinner? Spend a dollar on you for a tub of popcorn? Trust me, by the age of forty, you'll be flat on your back getting an elytrostenoplasty, an operation to narrow your vaginal canal! And, look, you keep scratching yourself!"

Laura said, "I have these itchy bumps—"

"—around your bow-wow, I can see that," said Ann Marie Tubb, "and the opening is red and swollen, right? Get a cream! You have an STD, like warts!"

"Ouch," howled The Krauthammer, whose laugh sounded like a sea lion choking on sardines.

Ronny Quinquigesima offering helpful advice said, "Eating greens would help. I live on edible leaves. Dandelions. Nettles. Curlydock. Creeping Charley. It has an amazing effect on the body which I consider a tabernacle."

"You still have the face of a farm animal," growled Ann Marie Tubb, half-sloshed and yanking The Krauthammer's pony-tail for laughs.

"Don't call me Brenda. It's Florian now," said the woman in the trilby hat à la Patti Smith, passing the table and craning that goose-lamp of a neck. As she walked, repeating her mantra, her lips seemed even bluer, her face showing that insane smiling makeup job they do in funeral parlors.

"Shut your pie-hole," said The Krauthammer. As Laura made to go, she interposed a booted foot across the aisle. "So anyway, was he?"

"Was who what?"

"Warholic, impotent." Everybody cackled and leaned forward.

Shoving past the boot, Laura stood up and headed toward the exit, bowlegged, walking on camel feet, turning back only once bitterly to say, "I told you before, he's got a pud like a peapod. Pathetic. Pitiful!"

Again, Ann Marie Tubb and The Krauthammer exchanged mirthful glances. Tubb asked, "I'm going to blow this place. Too noisy. Want to go have a drink at the City Girl Café or Someplace Else, both over on Hampshire Street?" The Krauthammer chimed in, "Or at Flung's, down in Marshfield?"

"Let's cruise the Man Ray," said the dingleberry who was the novel reader.

"Where's that?"

"On Brookline Street, near you."

"Or Hideaway's Pub on Concord Street?"

"Or come home with us?"

"And party?"

"No. Not really."

"I'll be your protegeuse," said Nigel Eigl, grabbing her crotch. She smirked at Ann Marie Tubb, who looked back at her with teledildonic understanding, and then to Laura. "So, what about it? You into frottage? Buccal coition? Xylophilia? How about a hot-oil rubdown? Exotic fruit feeding? Balloon-popping? Beatboxing? Wack-rapping? Noise porn? Cowl-neck jumping? How about doing a three-way? I've got some bushes up from NYU."

"Sorry."

"Want to lick some latex?"

"Doubtful."

"What, you don't want your greens?"

"Another time, OK?" said Laura coolly, getting up to leave. She wobbled from the drinks. She moved faster heading for the exits, finally, than she did when entering a room, where she always paused, four steps like a robin, stop, four steps like a robin, stop, and so on.

"She thinks her ass is made out of crème brûleé," said Nigel Eigl.

"What ass?"

"Want some advice, chuckles?"

"No," snapped Laura, then felt bad. "Look, chill out, OK? I'm not going to chase him—or anybody."

Ann Marie Tubb calmly closed her eyes and said, "I was only going to tell you: get a deodorant." She shrugged and, turning away, coldly muttered, "Hope that helped." "It did," said The Krauthammer. "I can tell."

Laura's eyes angrily darkened, two windows, shades drawn. She flung out of the club into the cold air. A damp black colorless forlorn panorama from horizon to horizon made night only part of the gloomy drizzle that misted her empty heart. The dark coming down of it around her, even darker than the sky, made her feel small as a vole.

On the way out of the parking lot, before going back to River Street, she went to The Krauthammer's car and, looking around to make sure she was alone, drunkenly rocked, and then in one furious yank snapped off their radio antenna. It was late, however, and in Porter Square she found to her dismay that she had spent all her money and there was not an ATM in sight. A sleek new car suddenly pulled over by the curb at the Dunkin Donuts shop, and the driver in the shadowy interior, leaning over to speak to her, offered her a ride home. Her response, as if borne on the good tiding of sudden luck, was also a question. Would he also buy her a cup of coffee and a donut? He wore a suit, had black curly hair and deep-set eyes, and said he was a lawyer. He showed her his card: FRASS, WERDROBE, AND SPRAINTS.

"I may need a lawyer," said Laura coyly, taking the card. She read it and asked, "Are you expensive?"

"Get in. We can discuss price."

Fuck it, thought Laura. What was only another one of a thousand one-night stands did not register as consequential, good or bad, merely the alternative.

When the man gunned his engine and drove off, Lady Microbiocide wobble-headedly checked her handbag to see, among the Vaseline and K-Y jelly and Kim-Wipes, if she had any Monoxidil, which she always carried in her purse for emergencies. Damn, she saw, in a rush she had not brought her condoms. No spermicidal jelly. Nothing. She thrashed through her bag again. "I don't have a catcher's mitt, either," said Laura. "A what?" "An I.U.D." The lawyer made no reply, only headed down Massachusetts Avenue toward Memorial Drive. Passing the old railroad yards, after circling a block, he swung into an empty MIT parking lot, drove slowly into the shadows, and then shut off the car

engine. He sat there a minute, grunted, then, reaching over, he took her roughly by the hair, which she liked, and darkly whispered, "Never let your mouth write a check your ass can't cash, sweetheart." Giving him her best room-service grin, all gums, she slid down to his lap and serviced him. He asked where she lived. Then driving her back to her flat on River Street, he dropped her off without a word, where she walked upstairs, crawled into bed, closed her eyes, and slept, almost at peace with herselves.

XLVII
I Wanna Be Your Dog

A swirling wet snow was blowing across Cambridge the next morning as Laura Warholic, throwing on a black coat and draping a scarf around her head, as peasantlike as a Pole in Poznan, headed up River Street in the wind and raw, cutting cold—clumping along in her black leather shoes like triphammers, their echoes ringing noisily along the sidewalks—to the Needles & Trax record shop in Central Square, where Jeff worked. Peering after her through a front window, Micepockets, limping, canted by nature's maldesign, was ready for her and slipped out and stumped up River Street in her wake. Two of his kids were ill, he had been screaming at his wife earlier for wasting water in the mangle she was turning by 6 A.M., and he was in a black mood, infuriated and jealous. Edna and Ida, in ripped wet boots but halfdressed, jumping over a railing at play, irked him, and he had slapped Edna across her face, hard. Laura, who never looked back, did not see him and was thinking of nothing but Jeff. They badly needed to talk, and it was going to be today. She got to Central Square where, dodging cars, she crossed the street past the stand where she kept her bicycle parked and shoved through the front door of the shop completely soaked, blowing in with her hair like a chiffonade, her face rash-red and wind-whipped like painted tole. She wiped off her welfare glasses, the dark ones, and pulled up her wet purple-striped ankle socks spotted with muddy black.

"What are you doing here?" asked Jeff. "You're soaked, with your hair like all stringy, man. You're dripping. You look terrible."

A mood of dark recalcitrance Laura always felt in the shop, an almost palpable feeling of unhelpfulness perpetuated by the two sour guys who also worked there. She had only been in the shop twice before, specifically because Jeff had not wanted her to come there. She looked at Jeff but only stood there with her dripping red nose and off-register lipstick and resinous smell, a smell that in its dankness gave off the rank odor of goldfish water, looking earnestly stern even if weak and suddenly hating herself for caring for him, for loving him, for knowing, as was usual with her, that she meant nothing to him, nothing that she knew, not a thing, and that all of this would lead nowhere, which is more or less where she felt she was. It was cold inside the shop and Jeff was wearing his leather jacket with the Slucks' name and colors and an Indian head on it. He usually wore it on stage. She asked if he were playing a gig later.

He coldly stared at her and said nothing.

"I came to see you, Jeff. I miss you," said Laura. She moved closer to him and went to take his hand. There were fumes of alcohol on his breath.

But he was having none of it. "I gotta lot of shit to do this morning, man. Boxes to unpack. CDs to sort. There'll be customers."

"Who gave you that?"

"What?"

She was pointing to a middle shelf with a stuffed bear with an old Craven Slucks sticker on its heart. "That," she said. "That . . . bear."

He made eye-knives at her. "Someone. How do I know? No one."

A silence followed.

"I want to stay."

"You can't."

"I need you."

"I feel like you should go."

"You used to feel different."

*

Laura returned in memory to the fate that initially brought them together. She had first seen Jeff at the record shop almost a year before where one rainy afternoon she had gone in to browse. "Working

the room." It was something that she had been doing for years. She learned from another clerk that he played in a band and soon started going to the Middle East where the Craven Slucks performed to a low smoky room half-full of locals, the usual aggregate of punk snools, foo-foos, sex elves, cretinous aardvoles, radioheads, codeinistas, hairy proles, criminally inclined catatonics, bulbocapnimists, simopaths, fag folks, overts, slunks, oafs, neo-dunces, vibration and dietary artists, neutrinas, unsocial phoenicopters, zoochlorellans, moronic rock 'n' roll monists, yag people, gangbusters and gangstalettes, long-haired teenagers, greasers, and various semi-educated techno replicons. It was not a big venue, but with this particular group there never was. No platform. No mirrors. No spots. Only two cheap speakers, a cheesy organ, a couple of guitars—the four guys in the group, who had made a few recordings, hated each other but as they had nothing else going on in their lives stayed together—and a small gooser with empty eyes and a bowl haircut mindlessly ticking a beat on the high hat. Laura had attended the club alone that night, as usual, and, having gone up to the front-left near where the lead singer sat playing the small organ and intermittently shaking a tambourine, she sat there blankly looking up with incandescent melancholy. She looked thin and slick as a switchblade and was wearing tinted glasses with her hair in a Barbie Doll side-part flip that was a halo of ropiness at the time, sea-wracked, from anxiety perspiration. She felt as it she were under a french-fry light that night. She had worn dark berry lipstick, had rubbed light lipgloss on her cheeks, and wore outdated tan twill flares, cargo pants the color of murray and banged up. Nothing of course ever frilly or girly for her, never soft blouses or light camisoles or soft Meow-brand cotton undershirts. She preferred slick plastics, usually brown tight artificial-leather jackets, and clumpy black shoes with fat cow-heels. Laura was on her third drink, a Cosmopolitan, when the band finished. She stood up ecstatically ditzoidal, with electric excitation blowing up like a storm in the chromosphere of her heart. After the last set on stage, when the crowd had thinned out somewhat, she had lingered at the edge of the room to get up some courage and, although nervous, eventually walked up to the lead singer of the group. Puffing great clouds of cigarette smoke, he howled a line from a Butthole Surfers song:

> "There's a time to shit and a time for bad
> The last shit I took was pretty fuckin' odd."

He cracked a can of beer and slobbered into the foam, dripping onto his shirt. Upon seeing Laura standing there, he said, "Did you know Gibby Haynes of the Buttholes, who dresses like a biker, has a crossed crack-pipe-and-syringe tattoo on his arm?" The three other Slucks all exchanged knowing risible glances. The room reeked oddly of soot and smoke and sweat. Laura, slightly addled, tentatively approached Jeff, the thin fingers of her long hands working as she nervously twisted her tiny rings around and around and around. She felt eager. Jeff, who had noticed her from the low stage, rolled over to his guitar with confident smugness.

She said, "You guys are awesome." She was dancing on endorphins. "That driving organ is like—" He smiled and picked up his guitar. "—religious."

"This is a Richter 9EEE with a double-cutaway body and twelve-inch-radius neck," he said, smoothing the instrument down, "with a single humbucking active-electronic pickup with figured, bookmatched Ovankol back and sides and twenty-four jumbo nickel frets, along with a nonlocking tremolo bridge, a sweet polished rosewood fingerboard, compensated bone saddles, and, notice, deluxe tuners with pearl buttons, as well as lightweight spruce bearings for deep, resonant bass notes, and that's *aside* from the active tone-control of the single tone knob, settable by push-buttons to three totally different modes: parallel, buffered humbucker plus distortion, and, by the way, the distortion unit here consists of three mini-potentiometers accessed via a plate at the back of the guitar, like a standard outboard fuzzbox." It was a sign that she was immediately his simply by dint of having blunderingly solicited at their very first meeting the only single bit of specific knowledge accumulated in his entire almost half-century of living. "I was playing a Hoffner Beatles bass through a Dutch amp the other night. Were you there? It was an old Ampeg with one eighteen-inch speaker. I blew up his Vox Pathfinder, man, a ten-watt amp with an eight-inch speaker. I want those cool Sunn amps like the Stooges used." He smiled. "You impressed?"

"Totally."

"I was going to, like, do a ballad for you. Then I thought: no way. She wants an insane thumping hard-on over-the-top cruncher. Was I wrong?"

Laura smiled. "No."

Jeff ran his finger up the frets of his guitar with a *scree.*

"Like music, baby?"

"Yours," she brightened.

"All of it?"

"I never heard such licks," she said, employing her tongue, her voice settling like butterflies on a branch. She blushed and her head wobbled.

"A lot of them tunes were written under the wire. There's a lot of tightrope activity on those albums. Back then we were under lots of pressure. We're collectible, man. We don't do colored wax. We're more subtle than that." He slipped a bottle of vodka from behind an amp and took a heavy slug. "Me and the guys did in-store appearances back in those days. '$1000 a pop,' I told them. '*Or I don't do it.*'" Jeff, who had been amped on crank and was already half-drunk, picked up another guitar. He had one leg planted on a speaker like a cocked gun and with one eye closed, head askew, for the moment defensively taking the measurement of someone so forward, a grateful gamer who was mooning for a fast poke, smashed a spiky chord on the chipped Telecaster that was now in his hands. Raising an eyebrow and smiling, he leaned forward into her small white face—pausing for all the force of his dramatic wit to take—and asked, "How do you know?"

Laura's face split open in one of those world-yampfing smiles, coupled with a dopey blush, and shifting from one foot to another she became suddenly garrulous with fluttery equivocation, airy words, and nervous gestures of self-offering. When they shook hands he noticed hers were cold, characterless, and chewing-gum soft.

"I'm Jeff."

"I'm Laura," she gum-grinned, folding and refolding her narrow hairy arms. "What a beautiful guitar."

He raised an eyebrow. "Dangerous curves."

"I love those dream-rock sounds. So retro! 'Kiss You Granny' rocks! Real bongo-funk hooks. Thrash-punk, right?" she gushed.

Ascertaining from a single glimpse that the woman was in his pocket already—she was not particularly attractive, tall, untweezed, and cadaverous—Jeff casually let it out that he was married, information that he knew even in his condition would not daunt her, as indeed it did not. He smiled. She was clearly an infatuation junkie. Merely being confided in flattered Laura, and, as Jeff spoke, her bony hands fingered an imaginary cameo at her throat as she hung on his every

word, the source of her instant ardor half-Dionysian, half-desperation. She was openly obsequious, making heavy-lidded eyes and flattering him with praise, submitting already, at least in her mind, to a potential protégée/mentor relationship. He saw in her flat chest and deathful thinness an aspect of her craziness and considered her jutting pink ears, wet and transparent, as well as her complexion the color of grade-school paste, as a kind of warning of something less unsavory than unheathy. She looked like a goddamn ironing board—*shut*, he thought. Still, it was clear that she was open for business. There was no question about it. He knew he could bonk her.

She quickly excused herself to go to grab her purse, promising she would be right back.

"Dig the freakpole," quipped the drummer, nudging Jeff. "She looks like she's been rode too hard and put away wet." The Slucks all chimed in. "Make her pay *you*!" "10-4! Backdoor man!" "Remember what Marlon Brando said?" another of the Slucks confided to Jeff in a low voice, pretending to bump into him, his back turned to her. "Quote: 'A woman with a small ass I treat almost as if she's a paralytic." "Anteater nose," said another with a snicker. "She could wear an auto nose-bra on it." "Rigoddamnmediculous!" All the guys in the group were giggling. "She has no fucking brow-bones!" the drummer said. "Man, that's thin! If she walked into a pool room, someone would chalk her up." "'Here's my card and on the back is a list of what I won't do on a date,' she says. You say, 'But there's nothing there!' 'Smile!'"

Jeff Bummely half-drunkenly laughed. An overweight, middle-aged guy with glasses, basically he played music to make headway with chicks, and one of them, earlier that evening, a bird-headed sex-funkateer with big tits and crazy hair of alizarin crimson while clutching his arm had pixilatedly screeched in his ear, "*I usa play your vecords, I usa play your vecords*." He smirked. It was so typical. There are lots of birds in India only because there are lots of flies. When Laura returned he smiled and said, "Wanna hear something real weird?" He coughed. "I feel that I know you, you know? I mean in the sense that's not, like, without logic?" he offered, immediately laying down an immense pile of fracto-cumulus clouds of the kind whose shadows look like islands. Laura blushed with an awkward but unconcealed slanting smile, high gums, which with her tended to accompany anything connected to men, and he could tell he had her by her incautious welcome and postural echo of his own almost girlish flirtation and swerve-welcoming

moves. "I saw you the other night, too, hanging out. Down by the Food Crypt. Funny the way life comes down, ain't it. Hey, here, look, sit down."

"I love your guitar."

"Which one?"

"That one."

"My Richter's my girl," he toothfully grinned, tapping it twice, vertically on the floor. "Beautiful sound. Tough as whang leather. I have a good collection: a Gretsch, an Epiphone, a fat Gibson—guitars I use playing country. I bought the fat Gibson myself down in Nashville at Hank Snow's music store on Church Street when we had a gig there. Ever hear of it? It's famous. The Gretsch I got me at Hewgley's. No voodoo shit when it comes to my music. I laid out big bucks for my axes, man. Paid for," he sang, "in greeeen. No stealin'." He grinned at his bandmates. "Weez Christians."

"I was gonna come up and talk to you," said Laura, "I mean, I looove your band, but I was like totally fried, I think, and thought, whoa, bad timing, you know?" Her stuttering words tumbled over each other, offering the illusion but not the fact of specificity. She wanted to know him and, reddening some, haltingly dared to ask, "Do you live nearby?" Several of the guys whistled. He took her in with a surveying eye and came closer to her, trying to balance himself on his drunken legs. He touched her arm with a knowing step-off smile, like a pig snorting a dust-hole. She gave off a smell of sour fruit. Or was it the odor of rubber? And, God, she *was* flat-chested. She had an infantile air that undermined esteem even while it excited desire. A gummy smile pulled resolutely at her reluctant face. He confidently slid his hand over her bony knee and whispered, "Next door."

There were good memories. But she was not thinking of them now. Now she was desperate. She was in love. Or was she? Did he want her or not? It was the first time that Laura had appeared at the record shop since first meeting the rock singer, although she had stayed over at his flat a dozen times or so. They had gone out to eat several times, at Lung's and at Mrs. Buloni's and once at Chidorigafuchi's; she usually paid and had been happy to do so. He had nothing of Eyestones's conversation, and, several times in restaurants, he made scenes—got into sharp exchanges with waiters over matters insignificant. He was touchy and had less of a fighting edge than a dark corner of insecurity that too often gave vent to violent confrontation. She felt that under-

neath he felt he was a failure, and she harbored the kind of daydreams that she was right for such a person. He asked nothing of her, only sex. Was that so bad? Within weeks of meeting him she began fantasizing about eloping to Las Vegas with him—he talked a lot about Vegas and one day playing there—wearing a strapless red satin dress and getting twin eyebrow-rings instead of wedding rings. She felt he would be the ideal man, if only he had a different brain, but she was tired of intelligent men, fed up with imagination, disgusted with analyzing everything. She realized he was imperfect, but, who knew, maybe he was *her* imperfect. She loved going to clubs now, seeing guys with proto-punk hair, black leather, and attitude. She needed all that wiry, coiled type of energy. The motley gear, the cool boots, the druggy shades. The guitars. The drums. Even the stage. All of that she adored. It was all so . . . *daunting*. She was almost content. But Jeff had given her so many mixed messages. One night she went and got a room for themselves at the Hotel de Dream but Jeff failed to show up, while Laura waited up all night lugubriously staring at the broken neon *God less America* sign out front, mis-buzzing with incoherence. It had been humiliating. He never apologized, then or ever. Along with purchasing the group's four or five outdated old albums and playing them in her room night after night, she tried to be everything she imagined Jeff wanted her to be, from adopting a bad-girl gunslinging persona with dark lipstick and dark-tinted granny glasses to a sort of nature zombie full of languorous, post-hippie cool that bordered on lifelessness to that of a devoted open-eyed, bunny-soft groupie with ribbons in her hair waving like an old frigate's telltales, which she enjoyed wearing but proved too homely to bring off. What was she to do?

The fact was that after a few days she had about as much effect on him as a stuck hi-fi record, and very little time had passed before he began to shut her out. One night, after pleading with him, Jeff let her sit on his amp while the band played. It was great. But she had had to beg him to do so, which was mortifying for her. Although the quintessentially Nineties term *morphing* described Laura to perfection, in spite of the fact that her squirrelly punk persona was twenty years out of date, she began to feel she could make no possible headway against that absent wife of his, who, although socially above him and whom he chased away by his arrogance and laziness and drunkenness and womanizing, still held sway in his heart, or so he told her. Jeff, who had often been violent with her, actually mistrusted his wife, however,

having had solid proof that sexual misadventures were playing a large part in her own life in New York. After a few weeks, Laura could only conclude that she had been a drunken afterthought. In her typically desolate way, her habit for years, she tried madly to hang on to him, calling him, offering to do errands for him, getting him coffee, bringing him small gifts. One frantic act followed another. She even tried Vedic consultations and gem rings and destiny cards. It was at this point that Jeff Bummely now began studiously to avoid the woman and started referring to her to his few friends as "Psycho."

She was bewildered and lonely. She began going to clubs alone, the Club Bohemia and the Rat in Boston, and came home on the train by herself, getting off at the Kendall station on the Red Line in the dark and feeling as empty as the streets down which she walked home. Night after night it was the same thing, repetitive sadness. In the wee hours one morning, upon rising from discomforting dreams, she got up, went outside, somnambulistically walked through a deserted Central Square, and in a weird counterphobic mood of desperation knocked on the door of Jeff's apartment. Answering the door, Jeff saw her, cursed once, and shuffled back to bed, leaving the door ajar. "May I talk to you?" she pleaded. No answer. "Are you angry?" No answer. From the snoring lump under a brown blanket, stained with cheap wine, could only be seen the haddux of his big white toe sticking out. She waited some time. Amid all the confounded mess there, among all the guitars—an old Washburn steel-string, a Guild archtop, a blue Adamas, a Martin D-28—she found a "Model Agreement" form with the number 2257. A model? Was that his wife? Or some whore he was disgustedly fucking to forget her? Laura sat there in the blue darkness, pointlessly, silently crying. Looking at him, she felt cold. There are no straight lines on the human body, thought Laura, Eyestones was right. Nothing is ever ours that another may deprive us of. It was true. Nothing. *She* was nothing. Was Frank Sinatra wrong when he said that loners were losers? If Jeff was worthless, a soul-murderer, a logic-batterer, then why did she care so much?

She spied an open packet of Dean Markley strings and took one out. *Nothing is ours that another may deprive us of.* What was she thinking of, she wondered, as she slipped the string around one fist and yanked it wide, imperturbable as if before a precise conception? I am here in spite of myself, not here in a room, but on earth, and feeling her body was a costume she wanted to rip off it occurred to her to wrap the

string around her neck and pull. Suddenly with sputtering white spit Jeff woke like a mad *crapule* as if doing a skull and rising up out of a snore-storm—his arms swam through the air—in a whist of vibrating fury, bellowed, "Are you still heeeere? Get the fuck oooout!" She fled.

Feeling miserable transformed her loyalty into a rapidly diminishing asset. Laura began now spending her nights at TT the Bear's over on Brookline Street, and developing crushes on guys who played that evaporated as other groupies came up between sets, saw Edable Gray, Bunny Foot Charm, Garage Dogs, the Syphiloids, and Kim Lenz and Her Jaguars. Just to irk Jeff, who hated him, in one lonely interval Laura paid twice to twice see Dave Gibbs of the Gigolo Aunts singing "Super Ultra Wicked Mega Love" and "Everyone Can Fly." She thought she might bump into Jeff at one of these places, but being vigilant was exhausting, and it was unlikely anyway as the Craven Slucks rarely played in any of the joints she chose, for they preferred to play at O'Brien's where they could drink their faces off.

It was on a Friday night that Laura eventually came to see Jeff at the Green Street Grill, a low wooden dive only a few blocks up from her flat on River Street. The punk band Speedball Baby was playing at the time. She was sitting up near the front with a rancid, long-haired depressive whom she had met in a bar named Harvey ("No Day At The") Beech, a glum, foreshortened, twitchy little doper with an unprepossessing road-rash on his sloping head and a K Records tattoo on his arm of the sort that rocker Kurt Cobain bleakly sported when he was alive. Beech had a low, square, uneven forehead and a chin so weak and shallow that when he smiled—an angry upside-down sneer—he literally appeared to have no bottom to his face, which simultaneously exaggerated one tooth, a prodigious white fang, extruding from his lower jaw like that of a piranha. He was flannel-mouthed, hamhanded, and constantly at odds with himself, which never prevented him from trying to chat up whatever chance woman he saw, spelling out to whomever would listen his sudden schemes, hopeful observations, any of the inauthentic and futile triumphs of his he felt the need to share whenever they transpired. In his empty and open-faced homeliness, he was the visual equivalent of a crash-test dummy with wormhole eyes. Nobody in the area of Greater Cambridge looked so bleak. His shoes were split, and he walked with a San Quentin penitentiary shuffle. Circulating about the same streets and purlieus that Laura did, he always kept his eye on the main chance. When he could spare the

money, Beech went to the penny papers and took out classified ads to meet women, personal ads peculiarly written and sickly focused—it was to one of those ads that Laura who daily read such things first responded before they met in a bar—ads recapitulating some of his weird fixations:

SQUIRREL

You were walking through Inman Square Saturday night with a squirrel costume on. It's vital I find this person, or anyone with a squirrel costume like that! 383987

and

LOOKING FOR MY QUEEN

SWM, 35, I want to meet my valentine. Slightly plus-sized women OK, too. I'm color blind. Love birds, Metallica, most music (esp. Indy rock) Turn ons: rubber, watching movies, Wesson oil parties, gag-balls, meth-od acting, (Get It?) Boffo! 89435

and

MOTORCYCLE HONDO

I'm toned, hot, hairy, devilish, a homeowner, college-educated, financially secure, corporate Republican with mesmerizing eyes. I don't mind if you've got any rashes. Be ready for the time or your life. Live in metro Boston area. This is the real deal. 56360

He had been living up in the woods of northern Maine in a broken-down doublewide, but one weekend it caught fire and burned down during a free-basing incident that cost him a summer in stir, after which he decamped to Massachusetts briefly to take up part-time employment roofing and siding for a shady business run by and owned by Brazilian illegals until with time he grew savvy with the unconditionally assumed conviction that working was strictly for stiffs. A total loser, he was broke most of the time, impoverished, always a step away from vagrancy, and while—neurotically, suspiciously, protectively, trying to dissolve himself in crowds wherever he happened to find himself—he still roamed the streets working various scams for money, free-sheeting during the day and at night often farcically sleeping on top of a clothes-dryer in an all-night laundromat, where he had become something of a fixture. He had small, bunny hands, the sallow skin, always

eerily moist, of a compulsive masturbator, and a darkly uncertain but surly and obstinate glower, mainly self-disapproval, that showed him to be a flip-book of faltering moods. He had once insanely hurled a piano stool at Laura. He had been hauled into a federal court several times for compulsive shoplifting, which in liberal Massachusetts was called an "impulse control problem," and for aggravated assault on women, which was described as an "intermittent explosive disorder," and instead of being punished he was issued a disability card worth $100 a month for food, which he supplemented by stocking up at a local food pantry that gave away groceries to local indigents. Basically, he lived free. He was also on a list to receive free drugs every week, because of his anti-social behavior, which he sold to buy heroin. Still, he wanted more money for more drugs and so put plans into motion. He resorted in extremis to devising scams. In desperate straits, he actually practiced with Houdini-like celerity to swallow small swag like thin bracelets, necklaces, rings, and small jewelry of any sort that he would convey out of the stores like a thieving Pawnee by holding them suspended midway in his throat until he got clear. He always checked telephone coin-receivers and banged parking-meters and habitually hung around racetracks during summer, sorting through discarded tickets in the odd chance of swindling bets thrown out by some poor fool or other who did not realize he had won.

Beech, who was constantly breaking capsules to grind down to powders to sniff, sold crystal meth and had put to memory all drug penalties—two years for over one gram, five to ten or more ("trafficking") for over ten, life for over a hundred, etc.—and ran out of money with abandon in hours. "I'm into powwow, what can I say?" he told Laura, his white fang flashing. "It's my main attraction."

There were absolutely no restrictions on any idea that came into his head. He thieved CDs, books, cutlery, jewelry, books, records, pots and pans, and clothing in general to recycle them when and wherever he could—mostly often from doorways—for short money. With a shim he broke into any automobile. He sold his blood, his sperm, and several times, his hair. Once when he was badly strapped for cash, he went so far as to lend his body out for forehead-advertising, when he went walking around the neighborhoods using his face-space as a human billboard. One of his get-rich-quick schemes was known as the $50 Threat, whereby he would leave notes at chosen addresses, threatening, "Pay attention! Leave $50 in your mailbox or I will burn your house

down." Another was a cozy ad-selling scheme called 100 Percenting, where with sample pamphlets he would canvas various businesses purporting to sell ad-space for a forthcoming publication, and then after collecting the money he would abscond. It was called 100 Percenting simply because he took all the profit and ran. Still another favorite of Beech's was the broken glass scam, when he would go walking downtown behind certain expensive cars carrying a window-sash that had already been broken, and just as the car tried to back into a parking space, he would bang the rear of the car with his hand, quickly throw broken glass at his feet, and begin shrieking, "You broke my window!" while angrily proffering a phony window receipt of $150, demanding immediate compensation, and then pocketing the cash.

Laura Warholic would never forget one night at the Green Street Grill while sitting with this lame escort of hers as he rubbed his road-rash—it was a turning point for her—when she experienced jealous horror in a single instant. As she sat there, Jeff ambled in with a fairly attractive blonde, compact of body, who had a chiseled profile and intense blue Slavonic eyes, and then spent the entire evening sitting with his arm around her waist. Laura, who merely sat there, at first stunned, then mortified, swallowed and did not change her expression all night. She sat rigid. Her eyes were burning with held-back tears. She never moved, afraid to get up, even to use the bathroom, although her bladder was close to bursting. She had been puffballed. It was the first time that she had ever seen his wife.

Laura resented how Jeff never had any time for her and in the rare chance now when they did hook up and went to bed together he would drunkenly fall asleep. Afterwards, if they did have sex—he was always drunk—he would get up and leave. She did not count anymore. She became increasingly colorless to him. It was as if she had become the negative of which Jeff was the colorful print, he who like a cocky independent fanfaroon began to mock her for her chronic dependency. Why did he never come to her flat? she wondered. Why did he call only to say that he would call later? Why did he ignore her? Why did the blue flame die? Where was the ignition he once seemed to have for her? Where were his small dancing eyes now? His time for her? Why did he never include her in what he did? Why did he not want to meet her mother or her friends? Why did he never give her anything he bought for her or say "we" or take her out in public or promise to tell his wife about her?

Alienated even further, however, Laura now sat up night after night feeling hopeless and listening to his music and in the chronic grip of a black and sickening dysphoria penning long needful letters, endless letters, morbid letters, peculiar letters, revised and confessional and desperate letters that told him of every one of her feelings. She kept odd, vampire hours. She flirtatiously began to use stamp language on her letters, inverting them at angles, from something she read once. She mailed him postcards and risqué studio cards and boxes of candy and small delicate soaps, once a colorful scarf, and spates of autobiographical revelations of what she realized she needed and thought she could give him. No matter who, the unhappy are tiresome. Misery, devouring itself, was turning her into a loony. The more despondent her letters became, the stranger they grew and the more repulsive to him they became. She engaged in what is called love-bombing, a total, uncontrolled intensity of almost rabid extremes. The letters, madly occasionless, grew by the box lot and promised to continue. Jeff now began to throw the letters away unopened. He told her that he was in love with a twenty-one-year-old girl whom they had hired and who now worked with the band. Laura did not care, she told him, she would wait for him, put up with anything, forgive and forget. She hated Harvey Beech and began greatly to resent being stuck with him and his aggressive and imposing homeliness. She dyed her hair a sort of dark mulberry and went to Rite-Aid and bought tubes of nail polish and painted her nails with Lickety Split and Transpire in an attempt at a makeover. But she saw grey in the end. She had all sorts of questions. Should she get an injection of Botox for the crow's-feet and wrinkles around her eyes? She had read about the procedure in magazines. A series of needle sticks were made in the orbicularis oculi muscle surrounding each eye. Afterwards you had to sleep with your head elevated the first night, and the skin got swollen and drippy. She hated her low forehead. And her nose. That bump! Skin could be trimmed from the nostrils. The shape of the nose could be sculpted. Would there be swelling, bruising, post-op hemorrhages? Pain? What about facial implants? Liplifts? Breast implants? Bra inserts? She now began to worry that her labia were not symmetrical; should she get them trimmed like Gayle Bagle once did as a birthday present for one of her boyfriends in San Francisco? Laura went out of her way to send Jeff, as she had to Eyestones, a handful of those lurid snapshots of herself snapped in San Francisco, overlipsticked bra-and-panties poses in a room she did

not think was messy but was that by means of a time-delay she had taken herself, six or seven prints in close-up she did not think were garish but were. But they did not work. Nothing worked. It was not a good sign. Jeff began to be unavailable.

Was this a courtship? she asked herself. It was not. It wasn't anything like it. Was it normal? It was not. As she had told Jeff all about Eyestones, freely gave away everything and anything personal, in order to ingratiate herself with him, she now began to resent him for having *heard* her confession. An anti-intellectual *simplificateur*, she still proceeded only by way of schemes and was getting nowhere.

Despondent, immune to abuse, she often sat alone drinking caffe lattes at the small Brookline Lunch around the corner from his rooms, moping, hoping Jeff would come in or walk by or maybe somehow see her through the large front window, where she slouched in a mood of desolation, her lower lip looking like the extended mandible of the skimmer bird, or perched in jittery suspension like the sheltered risk she defined in one of the few booths there tight as roller-coaster cars. She came and went to the café with her notebook, unannounced, like a solitary Indian, riding bareback, pulling travois. She sat in the cubicle at the Slightly Red Bookshop, unhappily just brooding over magazines, and sometimes went into Boston to Houlihan's Bar in the Quincy Market and took out that notebook of hers filled with rambling and angry scribble and peering into its chaotic pages tried to discover why she so hated the people who had wounded her, yet the list was so long, and the migratory exaggerations, even if she had written them, so completely unable to disguise their lack of intelligence or want of honesty, that it seemed a profitless enterprise. She went back to Chidorigafuchi's for Japanese junk food and appeared at noon at Mrs. Buloni's where sometimes Jeff went for pizza. But he never appeared. No one did. Not even Harvey Beech now. He had been arrested and slapped in jail, having been traced down by the police to a small meth lab in an old abandoned house in North Cambridge, where he was found cooling up lithium out of batteries, phosphorus out of railroad flares and matches, and mixing it all up with cold medicine he had stolen from drug stores. She soon found herself often just roaming the streets, pondering lightly a bereavement she dare not plumb, pondering the idea of meeting someone—men, anyone—driven like an idle but disturbed *dragueuse*, seeking someone she had never seen before. She who would have been far better pleased if she were dead began

to hate herself. The girl with the brown fur bathing suit. Foot breath. The loser. The days seemed to be passing in slow motion. She cried buckets. She wept in anger and in defeat and out of frustration and in the late mad hours wondered if Eyestones had been correct in what he once told her about tears, that they were not about sadness but about people being cross at themselves. When she tried staying home in the hope that the telephone would ring, she merely ended up alone, eating take-out food and crying. She felt as lonesome as the empty-sounding three-toned railroad whistles that she heard every night from the lonely railroad tracks near MIT. Crying in her miserable rooms much of the night, her whimpering sounded like the baby-cry of crocodile litters, muffled squeaks that went unheeded. She could not stand being alone. Loneliness has echoes. She heard them in the leaden delusional hours of the night, and in the waking morning. She repeatedly walked the very same streets over and over again, confining herself to what the government in other contexts call "limited ground clearance," the stalking area she chose. Obsessively she went for walks in the early pre-dawn hours up around Central Square to see if the lights in Jeff's apartment were on. It was not long before she began to deliver cold ultimata to him in spite of the fact that she was convinced that displays of jealousy eventually created in the object of one's passion the mind-set that makes it true. She telephoned him at all hours of the day and night and left frantic and despondent messages on his answering machine. She continued writing long, desperate letters to him, copied word for word into endless and repetitious pages of her posturing and self-deceptive journal, imploring him by way of her encyclocinematic insights to try to see how much she truly loved him, all the while crazily and counterproductively now cursing and blaming Jeff's absent wife for failing to understand him, which ironically only served to harden his heart even further against Laura. She would sit up late at night and read back from the crowded pages of her journal the useless assemblage of notes and indefensible prejudices and try to make sense of them but often failed to do so. So she kept moving. She couldn't stay home. That was too unbearable, so she continued going to clubs alone now even more, perspiring, giving off an irritating stress-scent as sour as diphenylchlorarsine, just like a vole, open to diurnal and nocturnal raptors, leaving traces of urine reflecting ultraviolet light—except that even with her hair dyed maroon and wearing a bra with underwires to push up what she wished she had, no one ever bothered to speak

to her. Or even look at her. And she continued haunting the shadowy purlieus of the Middle East, that unprepossessing purple-and-green monstrosity on Massachusetts Avenue, half restaurant, half nightclub, with its dimly lit rooms and performance-stages along back walls, both downstairs and on the ground floor. It was an actual waking nightmare. It was as if the unknown had suddenly come true. Laura was going nowhere fast.

One night Jamm the Wesort happened in his stealth to catch Laura after a concert coming home late through the dark streets of Kendall Square. "What it am, baby!" he cooed, flashing out of a doorway and doffing his hat while simultaneously raising a poison finger at her when she came to a stop in sudden shock. "You got what it takes, main queen, mm-*mmm*. Smoke in the city—in the *ci-tay*! So where you takin' yo self? Want to par-tay? I gots the street grease, OK. Note the bling, right? Look, check it out, I've got a pointy nose like a white man's, nothing flat, no liver lips or nuthin'. Ahm a feeaatured cat! See?" He grinned. "White teeth, see? Not like one of them African macks, wif its nose open and a bone in it. You like my sky piece?" He tipped his porkpie hat. "Jelly. Five-finger discount. I wears it on a left raise, check it out, wiv a blip. Fly, right? Yo, I *get down!* Wif my car. Wif my bitches. Wif my music. I'm no chump motherfucker. Had a Tech 9 handgun oncet. Done rap. Freestylin'. Drivin' around on twenty-four-inch rims—tricked out—and diamond chains," he said with a smirk, spitting it all out in a convincing patois. "*Homey* clothes! Didn't give a fuck. Po-lice? I cap they asses! Get *down,* man. Be real. That's for fuckin' crackers to wear and tear. Yo, I been throwin' jumbos in Central Square for a year and you see me?" He had been hanging out as usual down by the railroad yards—no one knew where he slept—with what he called his "rapper" friends, where in the shadows the homeless winos, their laughter and easy jive giving off a sound like a low marimbaphone, sat in old wooden sheds, built in another time, scooping the jelly out of Sterno cans, squeezing drips out of it in rags, and cooking the ghastly juice over small watch-fires. Walking, Laura muttered something. "C'mon, stop whipsering. Why you whipser? Slow down, mama. Talk to Jamm, hey? Want some 'bark'—some Mad Dog 20-20? Do some white crosses? Try some gooood shit from Afrighanistan, some dusty shit?" He was high, and she noticed he was wearing a black wife-beater under a cheap army coat. She kept walking and did not look back. He paused, shook a loose shoe, and hip-hopping to catch up

with her lowered his voice to a lewd whisper. "You into third output? Stop. Listen. You dig third?"

Jamm circled Laura Warholic like a cartoon cat. "Want some hit-it-and-quit-it? You smoke? What, you like music? You innerested in dancin'? You wanna be wid me?" He was trying to create, like a stud, what is called a yes-ladder, capturing her attention by asking questions that required obvious affirmation. "Wash you *want*? Talk to me. Jamm's got skills, yo. Wanna be wanted, momma? Thass my repertoire, my bag o' tricks. I know you, like I be seein' you, see, and know what you got." He took out a cigarette, lit it, puffed, and then he took her arm, which she pulled back. "Make it fiiine, duchess. I can't arrive wich you at dat?" he asked, hopping up with jazzed body language. She kept on walking. He stopped her again by taking her arm. He blew on her neck.

"Quit it," she said, smiling.

"Yeeaah."

"Stop."

"C'mon. You barbecue, bree—*fiiine* dinner!"

"Don't."

"Do." He laughed. "Do the Do Do. Yo, take one. *Take* one." He offered her a Kool's Super Long. "Want some bark wif a Nehi grape soda?"

"Please."

"Let's remoniss, Heidi Doody."

She weakly pried his hot hand off her arm.

He stopped.

So she stopped. He knew she would.

"I wanna go souf on you, baby."

She feigned bewilderment.

"See, you smile."

"No, c'mon."

"Where you at? Break off some love for me."

"No."

"I be tonguecat," he said pawing her ass.

"Don't. *Don't.*" It was lame. She revealed the Garbo phenomenon: a hardening of the mouth but a gentling of the eyes. She pushed him away softly.

"We go down there," said Jamm, nodding to a doorway three down and grinning, drawing attention to the gold caps on his few surviving

teeth. He slipped off his hat, revealing his espaliered hair, and came close to her. He whispered huskily. "Check it out, no peoples around, see? Down by the do'. Let's dred. We be cool, do it soft, yo, doo wah diddy. Soft." He quickly circled her. "Thass my go to move, yo. Do it soft. Doo wah diddy."

She let him nip her neck.

He pitched away his cigarette. "Do it for me, baby."

Laura paused. She looked furtively, both ways, down the street. She waited. Then she shrugged. He took her obliging hand.

"Righteous," he said.

*

Jeff began to hate her importunate telephone calls and crazy letters and unannounced visits just as he had the way of her freely adopting his opinions and taking his point of view and all that rad presumption of hers that she was his girl at the one or two concerts to which he had foolishly invited her, jams where she muscled up to the front row with a show-tag someone had given her ostentatiously flapping on some crazy shirt or other or, worse, once or twice, even sitting over by the drums, just barely offstage. She had managed to confuse in the spinning irregularities of her web the dry radial strands to walk on and the sticky spiral threads to snag her prey and so confused—and angered—Jeff, who soon came to see by the stealth of what she wanted from him instead of the simplicities of what she brought to be with him that she was dangerous. What if his *wife* had been in the room or had come by for a visit? Or anyone else, like Lorraine or Mickey or Cathy? He often became visibly angry. Had he not explained to her, he asked, when she said she agreed, that he had been willing to see her maybe once a week at night, but not during the day, when she was an embarrassment? Hadn't he repeatedly told her? Hadn't he said that? Hadn't he *warned* her?

"Aren't you for fucksake supposed to be at a job or something?" screamed Jeff Bummely, disbelieving that she had come to Needles & Trax. He threw some CDs onto a pile.

Silence.

"*Answer me.*"

She became crestfallen. "I got laid off."

"What, just before Christmas? Fired again? I don't buy it! That's a

fucking crock."

"Don't. Please?"

"Well, *I'm* working, Laura. I'm busy. I can't fucking talk to you, plus," he added, while looking at her closely an inch from her face and mouthing sarcastically and slowly, "I need to work on my marriage." Laura huffed and snapped, "Oh come on, money talks and bullshit walks!" He looked directly at her. She smelled like a wet cat and he saw how her long hair had been hacked raw, making her eyes somehow darker and that large mouth on her small face even more sullen. She wore her Barbara Stanwyck face that looked in its feral narrowness as if she had just gulped a glass of sour milk. She grabbed his wrist in panic, fighting back tears, but he angrily pulled away and went behind the counter. "*No, no, no, please,*" she pleaded and, jumping with anxiety, humming with fear, almost unable to control herself, followed him like a pooch, sliding her hand up and in and around under his jacket, looking madly to try to center his face as desperately she attempted to make her need felt, whether it seemed pushy or not. She tried sulking, misty gazes, baby holds. Rubbing his abdomen, she purred and called him Sugar Chips and Scooby Doo. But to him she smelt like a punky apple, and he wanted to tell her that, insultingly, and have her go away and disappear. "Don't you see I want to be with you, Jeff? That I care and always will care? Your wife never cared for you and doesn't care now. She left you. Didn't she? Didn't she just walk away?"

Jeff neatly picked up her hand and fussily put it away from him like a dead, inanimate object.

"I told you before that it was my fault for screwing my marriage up. I don't know. I guess—" Jeff paused. You never felt that he was going to get at the end of a sentence without some gaffe or dumb solecism. "I guess I still care for her." Laura's face whitened and pulled to a furious point. "I gotta say it."

"You once confided in *me*," she angrily snapped and backed off.

"So?"

A customer entered the shop and began browsing. Jeff lifted his chin and jerked his head awry to indicate that she should leave, that he was too busy to talk. She did not move. Bugger her, he thought. Sitting at the counter, Jeff grabbed the long toilet-stick-with-a-key-on-it, smugly snarled, "My Fender," and with an adolescent, hippieish voice with refaning emphasis on vowels overarpeggiated and comp-chorded his way through a few unmelodious mutterances, feigning a feedback

guitar solo as he fake-fingered the quivering stick. He seemed almost imperious in his cold cockiness, curling his fingers to play an imaginary B-minor seventh chord and making arousing noises. Laura looked at him over the wintry bone of her Rudolph's nose, an unflattering shade of maroon deepest at the point, and felt only rue. She felt defeated seeing him wearing his black leather jacket with the Indian head on the left sleeve, which meant that he was singing somewhere that night, had a gig he had never told her about, of course, since he usually wore nothing but drab dark old jackets, black sneakers, and dung-brown trousers. But she needed him, couldn't he see that? There was no one else she could depend on now but him. She had burnt her bridges. She forced a hard smile that, squinching her eyes, highlighting the crow's-feet that even at the relatively young age of thirty-six always made her look uncannily older. The light in Laura's fudge-brown eyes now darkened, going purple and sexy. "I wanna do you," Laura suddenly whispered, moving closer to him, her voice going frog-deep, the low speech, the drumbubbling lust, everything from the throat making a promise to him. "I do, I do baby. I wanna—" She looked around. She now had a tight grasp on his arm of an almost cyanoacrylate strength.

But his lack of response made Laura look green and worried.

For the first time, Jeff angrily regarded this notch-thin, seemingly quasi-homeless hysteric with frank horror, almost a stalker, and he slammed his hand on the counter. "Oh Jesus, Jesus, *Jesus*!" he cursed. "What are you *doing*? I can't fuckin' breathe! Will you get the fuck out of here!" Her thick, arched eyebrows contracted with the effort to focus on the suddenly infuriated object in front of her, but she looked only hilariously, comic-bookishly crass and twitching under his exterminating glances that read perfectly her conscious and unconscious resentments. Laura was no Pollyanna. He had told her everything of his affairs, with Lorraine back in the 1980s, with L'Nor, the twenty-one-year-old piece of crumpet he had such a bad crush on, with hundreds of other chicks to impress her he had fabricated out of thin air. And hadn't he told her he was married, for chrissake? What did she expect? Jeff was beginning truly to hate her. Why? Male lions particularly hate hyenas. And now she hated him. Hated his circular face! His drunkard's breath. Hated his queer rock-star moves and toilet-key guitar! Everywhere relationships hopelessly triangulated. Rejection again.

Dear Baby. Welcome to Loserville. Population: *You*.

Laura began to cry, turning away and folding herself into and out of a closing and opening hinge, while she rummaged into her handbag for a napkin, flaking it as she rubbed tears from her swollen, reddening eyes, now pouched. It wasn't just rain, but a downpour, as if she no longer wanted to live. Quickly, the customer walked out.

"Your indiscretions you don't even try to hide," she blubbered into the napkin.

He smiled. "How do you know?"

Shrugging, he coolly again began playing air guitar, lip-synching a heavy metal tune on a radio he flipped on as he walked across the shop. He knew her. He sized up what she was. Or was it true, as he heard, that the most deadly animals have no backbone? He didn't care. "1-2-3-4, Don't shake it no mooo-oore," he sang, "5-6-7-8, Love ya early, love ya laaate. I feel good. I tell ya, momma, I feeel good."

She could no longer avoid what she saw was true. He was a liar. He was a shit. He was a total ready-made phony with no mouth muscles and a Woody Woodpecker mullet—a paunchy, irrational, shiftless, middle-aged, untalented, suspicious, paranoid alcoholic of Irish extraction, a fat, shallow, out-of-date, second-rate rock singer, dumb as a box of wet hair, a self-defeating, narcissistic, overblown dunce from the Ted Nugent snag-it, bag-it, fuck-it, duck-it, give-it-cabfare-home school who spoke only in order to disguise thought and never said anything that was either understandable or logical or true. Stereo-man! What bullshit! He was thick as a brick! It was like talking to an empty sneaker! It suddenly did not matter anymore. He hadn't a car, didn't drive, was a selfish, lying, vainglorious lout! He was even worse than Discknickers who had more than once been described to her as an emotionally frozen man with a countinghouse mentality, a person utterly without feeling. He had no friends, read nothing, knew nothing, had spent less than a year affiliated at BU but quit, didn't own so much as a *book*—what, stereo-equipment manuals and back issues of *Goldmine*?—and now was playing what? And where? At best only once or twice a month at dimly lit, back-of-the-alley clubs, tiny, inconsequential matchboxes around Greater Boston with a repertoire of teenage bubblegum tunes and three-minute, three-chord Standells knock-offs with cheesy organ solos and rattling tambourines. The group sucked! They had never had a hit! She hated his terrifying BB eyes when they bounced in fury. She hated his pants. She hated his stupid flat with its shit piles of records and his percentage-configuring mind without

benefit of education constantly trying to tally up their worth when he couldn't even make correct change in the record shop without using his ten fingers. She hated that he owned a skull-bong and used the word *party* as a verb and sat in a beanbag chair and wore velour shirts. And now he fucking shrugs and drops her like a prom dress? How she missed Eugene Eyestones! She cut her eyes at Jeff coldly now, making the narrow slits watchful now, not in the least dreamy. A transformation had taken place. Laura was no longer sleek be-lipsticked Barbara Stanwyck of Hollywood now but long-nosed, pushy, hard-bitten, unknown, beak-faced Ruby Stevens from dirty ol' Brooklyn, a nothing of a nobody, a long, skinny, boat-footed, bone-riddled sad fishfrau from Mentalville, New York, no longer blowing on another man's dice but a creature trying to save her own pathetic life. She ruefully recalled that Eyestones had once told her how too many men, putting all their energy, charm, and fakery into courtship, created a false persona in doing so and only later cruelly, truly revealed their true selves.

Although Jeff had pretended he wanted privacy, what he actually wanted, she saw, even in his late forties, was to be stared at, petted, admired, consumed. She saw he disliked the company of men and only—always—preferred women. But as she had nowhere else to go and no one to be with she could not, not, *not* afford to despise another man for his swinishness, his coldness, only creep inside his arms, and try to make something of this affair that, like so many others, was suddenly dwindling. Or was it already over? What else had she? Warholic was a bastard. Mutrux she despised. Discknickers was a vain prick. Micepockets was not only ugly and married but a sick fuck. Eyestones, crucially, did not love her. Her soul went key cold. She was alone. There was no one else. *There was no one else.* What alternative was there? Hideous, pimpled Harvey ("No Day At The") Beech with his ponytail, an ironhead without a job and a loser without a brain? He was sitting in a cement box. Fear gripped her. Jeff alone now was the only thing she had left.

She needed him and wanted him and thought she was in love with him, his lies, his coldness, his smiling pie of a face notwithstanding. Her face did not so much fall as harden, leaving her smile detached, like bric-a-brac on an empty shelf. She took his elbow. "No," he snapped.

Jeff moved away. "I've seen you with some gumball yourself. I know the dick, the type of guy who'd sell you a rat's asshole for a wedding ring."

Clutching his arm, she pleaded, "I love you, Jeff." She was in her shrinking and craven insufficiency like an insect who breathed through holes in its abdomen and smelled with her antennae. "Please?" she begged, her moans reduplicating. "I need you. I want you." He angrily pried her hand off, pulling sullenly away, and went to a far corner. Her wanting him made her weak in his eyes. He reached behind a bin for a pint of Kessler and took a long slug and then coldly and silently began sorting through a box of LPs. He had been doing coke and speed, she could tell. She stood there. Her face grew long. She suddenly hated his rooms. She hated his magpie instincts. She hated the cozening cheapjack way he used her and dragged her over to his rooms like the town idiot, Minnie the Hatrack, simply to bang her. She looked at the wedding ring he wore. She hated it. She despised the way he retreated behind conned mottoes, inane mantras, and phony phrases like "I'm just truckin'" and "I do a suspended fourth chord like Kiss" and "How do you know?" All along, if he liked her, she reflected, why didn't he *love* her? *How do you know? How do you know?* She saw in photorealistic detail how he took refuge, as did so many ignorant people, in ironies he himself did not get, parodying seriousness, his face deadpan, by trying to look deep, giving out with expressions that hid the fact, not so much that he was uneducated, as that he was stupid. But had he ever cared? Why had he led her on? He had confided in her; why hadn't he gotten rid of his wife? "Don't bother to hide your wedding ring. I see it," she said—she had no edit button—and began such a ceaseless flow of non-sequiturs that all sensible exchange was precluded. Jeff raked a hand exasperatedly through his frizzy, whitish hair, took off his glasses, and leaning forward to peer closely into her face, maintained a cold, surveying stare that with irony both took her in and yet with damaging exclusion erased her. He was badly wishing she would disappear. His face twisted as, ducking down nose to nose, he mouthed with slow, over-pronunciation, "*I am mar-ried.*"

He smugly put on his glasses.

Laura's eyes turned the color of pond ice, steely, opaque, and gelid. Her nose, going white, seemed to grow a point, and suddenly taking aggression to another, higher, scarier level by turning information into a weapon and glaring at Jeff, meanly, assayingly, like an angry trollop trying to guess his weight, she spitefully hissed, "That didn't seem to stop you that night three weeks ago."

"What night?"

"When you brought your buddy Phil over to your apartment to fuck me on the floor," vehemed Laura Warholic, swallowing hard, her voice trembling with fury, "while, cranked on jumbos and shooting 'glass' and drinking screwtop wine —"

"—stoned on Trimar and sucking brews—"

"—while you sat there half-blotto in sicko-perve heaven with blue balls watching me after a loop-the-loop and doing a reverse cowgirl on him!" She always crooned her fury to him with the savoring sense of a sadist. "*Watched!*"

"Plus dinner beneath the bridge," he added cruelly.

Hers was a death stare.

"You prick!"

Jeff, laughing, told Laura in turn that he had to get drunk in order to fuck her. "We were all sitting around doing shots and drinking Sour Apple Puckers before you even came over. It was like freak night. Phil tried to slip you some 'Scoop'"—he made air quotes with his index fingers—"some GBH, that gammahydroxywhateverthefuckitis, so we could all do you. But we didn't even need to. You wanted it, slingshot. Were begging for it. Pleasepleaseplease. You were sloppy as the wet deck of an ocean liner."

She gave him one of the most menacing blood-into-ice-water stares he had ever seen. "You're a real bastard."

"We should have called a taxidermist: you were getting stuffed!"

She went white as paper. Her jaw fell, with a facial expression of the "I-don't-believe-you-said-that" sort, both eyes to the left.

"It didn't mean sh—"

Her nose went sharp with fury, and almost falling forward on a step she went after him like hell wouldn't have it, while reaching up to slap him hard and knocking his glasses off. "*Jealous, because you had a crystal dick, Jeff? Because you—*"

"You loved it! Getting busy on Poke Gulch! Spreading it and shutting it like a cheap set of cymbals, traffic woman," he taunted, smirking at her. "I couldn't believe it. You were rocking in your stockings!"

"Bullshit."

"It's the only time you come awake. Guys in the band call you the Queen of Anesthesia and—" he made a fishtailing gesture—"the Cod."

"You lying—"

"Anything to stir the pudding, Hump Bunny, at least from what

I saw."

"Oh, fuck me with a chainsaw, you—"

"Go home, get away, give me a break."

"Ugly Phil! Jug ears! Trousers wide, dirty, and out to here with his fucking holiday hair! Smoking peppermint sticks! Why didn't you go out and bring home some fresh fruit to do me, like Dave Gibbs? Was he too good-looking for you to take that big a chance? You jealous because he's good-looking? Got a problem here? Feeling insecure, Jeff?" she shouted, quickly hopping up and scaring herself like a crow. "You who were always pitching shit about me seeing someone else, always stopping in to see you, jonesing me about my grandmother breath, my hair, my birthmark, riding—"

"You bony bitch. You *live* at the Hotel Thirteen and fucking Velour Motel with coons and spades—"

"*Because of you!*"

"—and street niggers!" he spat. "Everybody's seen you in your fuck costume, right? Bitch frontin' on me?" he said, mocking blackspeak. "Turnin' it up? I own fuck you up, bitch!"

"You asshole," she roared.

As he stabbed the air, she had the chance to see that weird oculogyric event where the eyeballs in his head began to bounce and wriggle. "At the Velour Motel. At the Hotel Thirteen. At the Hotel Massachusetts. And at the Hotel de Dream, where everybody knows you are part of the fucking interior decoration!"

"With that black guy, Pony, exactly," yelled Laura, "and I almost fell in love with him, when I wanted you. *You!* Don't ask me why and do me any favors!"

As she spoke Jeff sarcastically wagged his head in a sing-song rhythm of schoolboy mockery and held up two flat hands: emergency stop. "Know somethin'?" he sneered. "I hate the ugly mole on your neck there—never told you?"

Laura was suddenly lost in a brief terrible moment of silence, of exploding exclamation points. Her voice then became so high-pitched that it was nearly tearful. "Jump me, pump me, dump me, right?" Jeff mockingly interrogated the sky. But he said nothing. "Like all the tweaked-out little skanks and groupies at your dumb gigs?"

He laughed scornfully. "Your engine was running the first day I met you."

"So you just go on your merry way—" Jeff went to turn his back

to her but she raced around to intercept and face him. "—*and I get dookie*?" she screamed, her eyes cruel as death. She was staring a hole through him with eyes like twopenny nails banged home in single hammer blows. She literally bristled, appearing to lose any sense of normalcy, unraveling. She looked like she had fallen out of an ugly tree and hit every branch on the way down. When her hair was up, she looked like a mule with a summer hat on, but now she seemed utterly bugfuck, bewildered and unhinged, with her eyes popping out and her mad fingers like talons clawing the air. "*Congratulations in joining the dope show, right, Laura? Take a dirt nap, right, Laura? Get out of my fucking life, right, Laura?*"

Meanwhile, Micepockets, looking starved and dangerous, was peering through the window of the record shop. He saw Laura in the corner, grabbing the man's arm, pleading with him to pay attention. He screwed his neck into his collar like a turtle and made a strangled noise. His eyes had the runny blue look of raw egg-white. She was shameless, whorish! Swallowing his bile, Micepockets with his full jaw working gnawed at his fingernails and began swiftly to walk around in irrational circles. He wiped his hair. He marked this lover. He could smell her lies. He could smell her filth. Again he felt a metronome in his head, deeper, within his mind. He ground his teeth. He went over to her bike. He yanked out his pliers. He cut the brake cords, punched out the front light, and snipped some spokes. He slashed both tires and, muttering a mouthful of curses, tried in vain to rattle the wheels off the bicycle, madly shaking them to and fro with cheek-shaking fury while spitting down his mouth and chin. He was leaking white drool. All of a sudden he began to run. He rattled back down River Street to his house, hop-frogging and gimp in the bad wind. He ran down to the cellar on maniacal hops, took out a piece of electrical cord, and run-thumping back upstairs he flung down in a single furious suplex his wife who began to question him and began beating her black and blue. Out of breath, he then ran hobbling upstairs, awkwardly taking the stairs two at a time, and burst through the door into Laura's wretched room. He looked crazily around, pawing his hair. He snatched up a kitchen knife from an opened drawer and dementedly began stabbing the bed, stabbing deeply, more deeply. He fell face-first onto the bed. But he stabbed it again. He kept stabbing it.

Laura walked listlessly into Central Square. Terribly, a weird far-away birdlike look came over her face, into her unfurnished eyes. She

stood, cognizant of nothing, a raddled thanatophilic yardstick, thin and tall and useless. It was freezing. The wet snow was blowing sideways. But it did not matter. The worst was happening, the very worst. She knew she was circling the drain. Now she did even not care. It was the worst.

You could hang Virginia hams on it, she heard from somewhere, ominously and low.

XLVIII
The Craven Slucks

The Craven Slucks, with several other groups, were engaged to play that night at Dog Hall and for the entire week, through Christmas. They got the gig because another garage band from Ohio had cancelled. A change of weather had brought in several solid storms the previous week, blowing northeasters, and left the city powdered white. Eugene Eyestones had been spending a few afternoons working in the Boston Public Library, researching future columns and checking various facts. Finished, he walked from Copley Square down Boylston Street and over to the bakery. Rapunzel was not there. He kept walking. He walked down to the ocean docks and back. Something was weighing heavily on his mind. He looked absently into the many decorated holiday windows along Summer Street. He could not stop thinking of Laura. She had seemed so unstable lately. Knowing that Warholic was suing her for an exorbitant amount of money, hatefully gaslighting her with intimidation, he decided he would try to warn her. He knew that she would not come to the office Christmas party, as she had once before, equally knew she would not be welcome now, but to cheer her up he thought he might invite her to the New Year's party at the Hotel Elysée. Instead of going directly home, he took the Red Line from Boston to Kendall Square, noticing as they clacked across the bridge after Charles Street how the Charles River, all along the banks of which the witness trees and sycamores stood sentinel, was frigid blue

with rime and sealing over with prayer ice. He walked down Western Avenue to River Street and Laura Warholic's apartment, where one of her roommates, Maudie—disappointing him, as he wanted to see Wing, who was apparently asleep—answered the front door and mentioned something about Dog Hall. She told him it was in Somerville, in a tough section called Spitestown.

Eyestones wondered whether Rapunzel would accept the Christmas present he badly wanted to give her: an old cream Bakelite "triple-throated" Kreisler radio. Should he simply leave it for her at the bakery with a note? With crackpated idealism he believed that now was the time to tell her he loved her. He felt that Rapunzel, unlike Laura, would know how to take care of herself without making a war of it, without all the toxic immaturity and insane self-destruction he had lived so close to these last few years. But it was entirely characteristic of his compulsively balancing mind that a promise to Rapunzel always involved a threat to Laura, for does not the very act of moving in one direction toward always involve fleeing someplace else? He thought of presenting Laura the silver necklace with a small silver perfume bottle he had bought her in Mexico—in spite of the Cuernevaca war she had waged—but felt guilty he would be giving it out of pity and not from love.

Somber-faced, Laura had meanwhile taken the bus alone to Dog Hall. She had attended rock concerts there several times before. It was an old cavernous warehouse painted completely black on a dingy side street, smaller than the enormodome downstairs at the Middle East. A large Friday night crowd was rocking. She slipped into the lower room there and was rubbernecking anxiously about, looking here and there for Jeff, searching through the motley aggregation of oafs with tattooed cheeks, nutboxes, pirate chicks, teenage girls in tube miniskirts and major lipstick, moshing party-stormers, Devoheads, Brechtian proles, halt-cranked groupies, rude goggle bunnies, metal morons, crueltoids, breatharians on meth, gutter foxes, pot orgasmists, stoned ponies with nipple rings, felchers, Goths with obscene words shaved into their hair, emo-punks, genderfuckers, martini vixens with fake eyelashes, dorky little poontang hounds, level-3 sex offenders, frowning ska-monks, vibration pixies, eerie hairball unidentifiables thrown up by one of the Milankovitch cycles of continental glaciation, dole-drawers, slaves who long for the shade and hirelings who wait for wages, and no end of fat, anti-intellectual Luddites in bat-black leather motorcycle hats

and jackets with lightning.

The music was deafening. The joint, replicating a large funky house party, was jumping, spread over with garish deep purple lighting that gave the crowd a consumptive tint and a look as it writhed like the demented in hell. People, both on and in front of the stage, wandered up and back, star meeting prole, moving about like shoals of grunts and butterfish. It was all of it claustrophobic, with the formica floor and a low dropped ceiling made of those cheesy etiolated square tiles from Seventies-style remodeled basements.

One of the two door-bouncers there, a man of gross corpulence with wide, hairy arms and a belly with the heft of a medicine ball, grinning, offered Laura four Adderall capsules—dextro-amphetamine-sulfate—and loudly grunted into her ear, "Some body jolt! Stick around later: I wanna come in your hair."

Laura immediately saw Jeff on stage and quickly ducked back from the rainbow play of the rotating spotlights into the dark shadows cagily to see what he would do. A neon purple light suffused the dim, cavernous floor, filled with fans and foxes and fools. Her hologram-green face looked small and empty and lost in the assemblage of hot, jumping enthusiasts. She seemed to be rendered immobile and imploded by an inexact, unreconciled fury. Her nose, which Discknickers once described as a "bird-frightener," seemed to grow longer and wetter there in the eerie arclight. She felt old and out-of-it among the younger people there. A girl with orange hair twisted into multiple tight pigtails, doing a booty clap and howling "Shout bamalama!" turned to wave to one of the band members, who bounced groin forward as he triple-banged his guitar and shouted to the audience mostly in black or white T-shirts who were all clothing the slopes that rose back to a half-circle of low, wide balconies, thrumming with noise, bellowing, "Sex is revenge! Sex is revenge! Sex is revenge!" Wild-looking women right out of the *Bacchae* and sleaze ingénues and moshers and coke whores with wraparound Ray-Bans all yowled, while infranaturals with nipple-clamps and ground-level habitués and guys with shaved skulls and various punk claques, all gathered there as if around a drum in a kind of primeval witchery, were stirring for trouble. Girl skag-shockers in nipple-defying halters with bare midriffs jumped up and down in boot-cut pants worn over platforms and tarty spiked heels. It was almost a parody of a fashion show, right down to the runway—in this case a slopway up from the lower bank of toilets where a proces-

sion of fruitcakes in futuroidal makeup lurched back and forth under the filthy stairway strung with black lights. The room, dark, smoky, and cramped, was baking hot. On stage the Slucks were all in high gear, perspiring, ramping, two of them now completely shirtless, bouncing, hurtling up and down, making wild and extravagant 180-degree guitar swipes like circling fans in the reverberating room.

A white fake-rasta in a yarn hat lighting a bowl tumbled over to Laura and said, "I hate yo' nose." She moved into the darker interior of the club hugging the graffiti-covered walls where the wafts of teenage perspiration mingled with pot and tobacco smoke was almost overpowering. Intentionally, she kept out of Jeff's sight. The air was so bad inside that after a half hour or so she began turning sickly green and went into the bathroom. "Race ya," she heard, as three exhibitionist-loud girls bowled in on a flying run in to the sinks. "I'm strung out on Mexican pharmatoohooitcals," laughed one of them, wearing red eye-makeup, leopard peg-leg jeans, and a red half-sweatshirt. "Demented slab!" "Freakbeat me!" They were howling and high. "Fiestatrax!" "Chockfullahooks!" "That's limon, Crissy!" screamed her friend wearing bright glitter in her hair and daring XoXoX—zock socks, colorful purple-and-yellow hose with the toes cut out to be worn on the forearms. "Give me more!" cried the third, dry-humping the sink in front of her and spilling water. "I wanna lose control!" Laura quickly moved out, avoided the rasta hat, and watched.

After a brief intermission, Jeff grabbed a sixty-ounce, a big can of Colt 45, raised it in a salute to the spoiling crowd, and slugged it down in one long pull. As they howled, he quickly ducked behind an amp and took a couple of pills and then gulped an eightball. When he went back to the low podium and resumed, he noticeably forgot all the songs. As he collapsed in a wheeze of drunken laughter, a dark pretty girl with large blue eyes and juicy good looks in wicked silver shorts emerged from a group of lo-fi IQs, whooligans, acid casualties, autosexuals, biastophiles, grumbos, crystal Methodists, deriderdopes, fantastic-realists, skate-punk princesses, lemurians, creepozoids with faux-hawk hair, black leather post-punks, scenesters, cold-eyed runaways, and rejects and, scooting up onto the stage, helped him up, while giving him a big kiss. Then she ran back down and turning to wave her raised hands she cried, "Sell me something, baby!" A young slickster with a halo of red hair one-mile-high-and-rising lewdly tried to grab her. "Not you, homo! Jeff's my baby!"

Hearing that, Laura blanched. She froze. In the meantime, Jeff, retuning his guitar, had resolutely fixed an intense kilowatt smile—it did not go unnoticed—on the sexy mulatto groupie with the trashy lipstick now leaning against a wall and bopping her knee. It was not Beth, the prurient teenager who worked at the record shop and whom she knew, nor was it that pretty bitch Maria, whom she had once seen coming out of Jeff's building with her British racing-green eyes and wearing a unitard with cowboy boots. Suddenly something dawned on Laura that was bullet-swift, bullet-true, and bullet-terrible. She saw her rival in color. It was the libertine L'Nor, a bold, young, magazine-pretty kinderwhore in four-inch Lucite sandals that looked as if they would be worn by streetwalkers on the planet Xorgog. She had a pierced eyebrow and a tattoo—a lighting bolt—on the back of her right hand. She smiled widely with shiny, hyperglossed lips and wore glitter spray on her cheeks and a single jet-black fingernail of mandarin-length made more singularly vivid for the beckoning maneuver it periodically made to the hapless singer up front. The young televixen had the bluest eyes—lewd, fish-shaped, elongated, amygdaline—blue-black-purple tanzanite hair that was satin-smooth, and her bare muscular midriff sliding down into the front of her jeans—camel-toe tight, unselfconsciously low on her hips—revealed her sexy pelvis and lovely whorl of a navel. On her arm was another tattoo of a blue razorblade with the bold words *Free Flight.* She was smiling sideways now, slowly and minutely coy, with the mesmerizing manner in the curve of its temptation of someone making a contour drawing. She was the very person Laura had seen in a Polaroid photo being passed around at that Ventures' concert she once went to showing her in a sexy, buttock-tight leotard, with a black suspender-belt and thigh boots. She was also the same girl with the pillowy lips in the photo in a tan-through green swimsuit! The girl she had twice seen swan into the record shop wearing little half-Ts and smelling of clove cigarettes. *And* the bitch with the silver Penelope of the Avengers elbow-gloves she had once witnessed coming out of Jeff's apartment! Laura instantly hated her on sight. She was all curves and wore arm-cuffs and a belly-chain and a blue T-shirt that read *Goo Goo* across the front of it, as if ostentatiously giving antic monickers to her bouncy shelf. A torrid promise played in her wimbling tongue, with which, she once confided to Jeff, she could tie a knot in the stem of a cherry. She was exactly everything Laura was not: beautiful, loud, laughing, profane, a tough, cocky, insolent, libidinous imago of spunk

with a hot, decadent, sexually undernourished, thoroughly mail-away look to her who was now the undisputed center of all sexual attention in the place.

Jeff was now a smirking Jack the Lad. His response, after rapidly slipping himself out of his jacket and sliding it as if it were a bowling ball into the wings, was to flirt with the pretty girl as he played louder. He disappeared again behind the drum riser for almost a minute—to kiss a girl?—and then walked gingerly, precariously, across the top of his amp stack, the way he had heard Kurt Cobain famously once did. People applauded. Staring at him, L'Nor hooked a thumb into the elastic top of her panties and snapped it, several times, after which she turned slowly and giving a little backward oomph with her pert booty—she stood out in the crowd—pursed her dewy-wet lips to make an ascending flutter of kisses.

When he noticed L'Nor there with her liquid posture, tight clothes, and the frank suction of that gaze, a transported Jeff struck the strings of his instrument with an ostentatiously loud gongoid backwards guitar chord. He was in his element. Out of a rising, doomy riff he cruised into what he thought was a dive-bombing, bee-sting roller-coaster tempo that in his mind raced madcap-like into full scarifying rock, thumpville, sheer rolling thunder. In fact, it was all of it nothing but wacky twang-twang-twangs played too loud.

"What does the Goo Goo stand for?" shouted a tall guy with nerdy plastic glasses, paperclips in his ears, and spiked lemony hair gelled out at a 90-degree angle to his head. He was struggling through the gathering, leering at L'Nor, trying to be heard over the inane radulations pulsing through the room. "Yeah, tell us!" chimed in two unfish with codlike eyes next to him, guys also lustfully boring in on her chest.

"It's the sound a pretty baby makes," shouted L'Nor with amusement, swerving her body and giving a slow burning look to them, pausing to add with an almost eutectic heat three soft kiss-smacks, "when sucking!"

"Love rocks!" "Rock rules!" "Rules suck!" It was the crazed trio of Dionysian bathroom women, bouncing up and down and screaming, not singing, as the band began playing louder and louder, and before long the women had all surrounded L'Nor like hardcore witches seeking her special amulets. One girl had a *Hello Kitty* tattoo and the others *Slut* and *Bitch* scrawled along their bodies. Everywhere kids were bucking, bobbing, and boogying. "That nail polish?" one of them asked

L'Nor, snapping her gum. "L'Oréal 'Black Box' nail enamel," came the cool reply. "You've got an awesome glow," said another. L'Nor crooned and opened her handbag. "Salt Glow Body Gommage," she moued. "Grapefruit and Juniper. Givenchy Sunset Face Prism. Cover Girl Cheekers Blush in True Plum. That's a bronzer with a tiny bit of shimmer to it. I fake all that glow." She smiled. "What glow I don't fake is this—" And with both hands she snatched up her T-shirt and flashed her breasts at the band.

"Gotcha!"

"I want to eat my lunch off your butt," said a big-nosed man in a short-sleeve auto-parts store shirt. A grape-headed friend of his, an illiterate-looking *gnoccho*, chimed in. "Yeahh! Want a pink lunch? A DNA Slurpee?"

Laura's eyebrows, crowding black, grew heavy as a spokeshave. Her brown eyes deepened into baleful smudges, her face becoming instantly wiped of all expression except the sudden blackness of shock and hatred. Demented with jealousy, wounded to the quick, she swallowed. Kiddie-park pussy! A wild snarl forming with sudden curses formed to break. No one for the drumming racket of loud guitars could discern in the midst of it all the ear-tearing scream of a certain panfuriated bell-bird there, which was Laura in mid-howl. It all played so mercilessly into her central fear, into her pervious but delible lust, for her envy often—mostly—took the form of hating other women, that she wept. She was one of those weak and spiritless women who won provisional favor with men by denigrating other women. How painful is envy in what paradoxically it reflects of our own pitiful smallness, confessing to the self-hatred it cannot immediately recognize, the way birds, for example, routinely and convincingly reveal their sad incapacity for self-recognition by repeatedly battering themselves against the hard mirroring surface, when in the last instant they suddenly come to see. It was exactly what Laura long failed to see about herself in the physical abuse that she with such malice had once levied against her two defenseless and retarded sisters—and then saw. She who had no sentimentality, unless it could be turned to her advantage, now in a scalding revelation felt caught in the inward bitterness by which she judged everything. Humility, self-sacrifice, meekness, altruism, patience, obedience, forgiveness: these were qualities Laura neither admired nor embodied. When a father deserts a daughter, a creature without a heart is fashioned to kill. All the merciless, unfor-

giving father-rejected, self-sabotaging, endlessly-aggrieved women in the world, all the Lindas, Dales, Joans, Cathys, Lauras, Patricias and Priscillas were in the final analysis all foundlings, growing into twisted adulthood like trees from saplings by neglect? There was an attitude on Laura's very mouth, an unsuppressed crack of unmercy, readable in the way that a scar recapitulates the fact of an accident. No one had ever known her to forgive anyone. When relationships went bad for her, as invariably they did, her response to denounce that person to the world and to blaspheme him out of hand was her only option. As she stood there in that incessantly drumbeating hell of Dog Hall, too perspicacious to like herself, too bitter to care, her eyes, brightened in indignation to a saucy shellac, widened with the inflamed stare of one who had not only been so offhandedly used but, worse, rendered small and ultimately made nonexistent. Humiliated, betrayed, belittled, she hated Jeff to the core of his soul.

Looking unfalteringly into herself, she recognized by way of the epiphany of rejection not so much what she could not have, though that, but everything she was not and could never be. The predictable is inevitable. It was a horrid glimpse into a "regression to mean," that she could not get—could not allow herself to get—too high she could not fall back. Laura's boring eyes grew cold as bullets.

She tucked the right side of her hair behind her ear and let out a stream of curses for his face, his glasses, a face that so resembled her unkind father's, her cruel father's, her stupid and censorious and perverted father's, her tightwad father's, her weak and indifferent father's, her deceitful and cold father's, her *absent* father's. She was now revolving like a pie-safe. But fear is often a form of energy, an irresponsible and manic energy, and it goosed in her an overwhelming release to act on the kinesis of her infuriatingly fearful terror as the banging band drove through its sonic disorganization of freak-beats and funk. It was then that Laura decided to steal Jeff's jacket, his favorite jacket, the black leather one with the Indian head on it. Hate can give you life. She moved through the crowd and quietly sloped crablike along the reverberating dark walls of the club over to the far end of the stage area by a walkup ramp and boards, with no one there, and stole his jacket—snatching it in a flash like a crow a crumb—his favorite jacket, the black leather one she knew he would most miss.

A few tattooed Gen-X, Nintendo-playing clowns stood around by the door, cracking loud jokes and swinging on poles and doing break-

dances and stripping their girlfriends. One imbecile then stepped out—clearly the club's immediate first choice for their Klub-Kid-Most-Likely-to-Don-Camouflage-Khaki-Climb-a-Tower-and-Start-Shooting-Strangers Award—and snatched at Laura's arm as she scurried out with the jacket. "Hey, fishribs, come here, I got what you need. *I got what you need.*" Whirling around and in a sudden ostinato of walling violence, she bellowed with a face of thunder in a fire-voice of unexampled ugliness that sounded as dangerously pin-piercing as bad lightning, "*I hate all of you pigdogs forever.*"

And she bolted.

*

Meanwhile, Eugene arrived at Dog Hall. At the door he nodded to the two thuggish bouncers with broad foreheads, Seventies-style eyeglasses, and sturdy teeth. *Hello Bigthan,* he thought, *hello Teresh.* "Who you?" asked Bigthan, taking a step into the darkness. "It's eye, said the Cyclops," muttered Eugene, looking past him. "What?" asked a bewildered Teresh who at first had him at arm's-length but realizing with reprovincializing proof, slow dawning, that he himself did not really belong there, said, "Awright, go in." Once inside, he was met in the face by the hurlothrumbo of loud vibrations and saw the mass of rocking and jerking young people whose noise bothered him less than their flocking behavior, as like stampeding ungulates they heaved forward with howls. When doesn't more mean worse? he wondered. He stood back and looked around for Laura but did not see her. He walked slowly through the wild, animated groups of loud, shoving people, slouching girls, gaunt addicts, rock princesses, and half-drunk patrons who all seemed hopelessly to have the same sort of sunken and reductive look. It was a monkey shelter, right on the edge of crazy. The din, which in its excess seemed to have a texture to it, was almost sordid in terms of its pointless defiance and frank lack of reserve, an entity of mindlessness all its own, as it were, hot and ready to turn red. Were not the demonic and the Dionysian always ready to spill over? he asked that part of himself not going deaf. Curiously, he reflected, most people seem nonchalant in a frenzy, buoyed up by anonymity and the sanction of sameness. He felt it was like being in hell with the lid screwed down. Imperfects are the norm of humanity, he thought, and comprehended he was one of them. The trial is not fair where affection is the judge,

he realized, and neither can justice be found where lack of sympathy fixes on a long nose and big ears. He who could have done something had been the unkindest of all. As to money, he was certain that Laura had not a cent to pay to Warholic. He decided to walk all the miles back home, which he proceeded to do under a threatening pile of uncouth clouds and an expanse of black rancorous sky. Betweenwhiles, he hoped to find Laura and tell her what he knew. He felt tired.

He felt bad.

But he did not despond.

XLIX
The Christmas Party

It was Christmas Eve and below freezing in Boston. Darkness encompassed the snowy streets filled with busy shoppers, families rushing about, and all sorts of traffic jams. A thick, square, bone-hewing butcher's cleaver of a cloud filled the sky. Christmas lights of red and green were strung at intervals across the downtown streets. Gathered in a large old room in the Hotel Elysée that, lush with golden-oak wainscoting, ormolu decorations, and real-plush chairs, had the elegant period charm of old Boston when ladies dressed in flowing creations and gents in spats and distinguished formal wear, the *Quink* contingent, absenting a few, were celebrating their annual office party. Warholic had planned to hold the party in the journal's offices, but the hotel manager here owed him several favors—not unrelated to several nocturnal interludes with Muskrat and Squishy—and Mutrux had advised him he could use it as a tax write-off. "God rest ye merry, gentlemen," sang Little Bob Merkle to a group of secretaries who stood in a corner, since the expression cost nothing, and, pulling off his red gnome hat, he scooped into it a fistful of lunchmeats for later. Ann Marie Tubb came goosestepping into the room with her best iron Rudolf Hess look, glowering, black, and disapproving, and The Krauthammer, scratching wax off a candle on the bar in annoyance, shouted for the bartender with, "Hey Mysterioso, disappear over here and take our fucking order, will you?" R. Bangs Chasuble, with his small eyes

smiling, breezed through the front door of the hotel, crying, "It is *bitter* out there, thank you, Mother Nature, honey—so cold I saw a chicken with a capon!" Within seconds he disappeared into the men's room and then flounced out shivering with self-excited vibrations. "Crowded in there?" asked Varwick. "Crowded?" "Smelly," Chasuble said, making a sour face and adding helpfully, "But do you know what I do when there's an odor in the biffy? I just strike a match and it's lilac time again." He was wearing a puffed quilt jacket and fruit-colored silk ascot, which he adjusted, saying, "I feel like the Christmas elf."

"Or fairy," said Gnorm, looking in a direction that no one was quite sure he saw.

"*Fata,*" said Discknickers, bowing. "Mr. Finocchio with a short nose."

"*You* should talk, with your tasseled shoes," said The Krauthammer to Discknickers, who was wearing a dark flannel suit, resort-wear, English drape, and a crisp Turnbull & Asser shirt. "Why, thank you. I like good neckties and shirts. The draped clothing around them has to be very soft, in a sense, and relaxed. Same with shoes." People had gathered around the long mahogany bar and were waiting to order.

"You can always count on a fascist for a fancy tie," said Ann Marie Tubb, whose hair like The Krauthammer's was done up in a weird holiday sprit.

"Who said that? The Hairball Oracle?" inquired Discknickers, slowly turning around with disgust and fastidiously sweeping a hand down his necktie. He calmly raised an olive on a toothpick and, nipping it, tapped his lips. "Here's to the repeal of the Nineteenth Amendment!"

"Here's to the abolition of weasels," said Ann Marie Tubb, making a claw of her hand.

"Trying *is* the first step toward failure, isn't it, Tubb? I'd truly give anything to know what it's like to be stupid. Genuinely dumb. I mean, exactly what is it *like*?" He smoothed his hair and turned to order. "I will have a Viennese Gumpoldskirschner." He turned to Eyestones. "I used to drink it in the Bohème Bar in Vienna, my dear, listening to Liana singing the 'The Tritsch-Tratsch Polka.'"

"How I yearn for days of grace!" pined Chasuble, nodding in agreement. "Years ago a function such as this would have been held at the Ritz in Boston or in New York City at Spivey's Roof, the Plaza's Oak Room, or, I don't know, maybe the Café Rouge at the Pennsylvania

Hotel in Manhattan where Glenn Miller made such a great big hit of that hotel's telephone number, 'Pennsylvania 6-5000,' or, even better, the Astor Bar—I have a recurrent dream, set precisely there sometime around 1943, of drinking daiquiris and meeting a handsome dark soldier for hot times—or, say, Tony's on Swing Alley on West 52nd Street, where the great Mabel Mercer so elegantly sat and sang, I like to think, for me."

"Gone are the days," agreed Eyestones.

"I've drunk daiquiris, its flagship creation, at the Floridita bar in Cuba where hairy Papa Hummingway hemmed himself loopy."

"True?"

"Oh, for a glimpse of the rooms in those small clubs, intimate, smoky, and sophisticated. We've talked about it, Eugene, remember? Old joints like the Spider Web, the Morocco, the Next, the Log Cabin, Pod's and Jerry's, Basement Brownies, the Yea Man, the Clam House. You know? I see myself in Shubert Pink at the thin edge of the wedge, 'in the making,' as we say," he made an exaggerated wink, "lolling around in something like Billy Baldwin's signature slipper chair. Jazz playing. Castanets. Finger-snaps. White porcelain ashtrays. Baby *discovers*! But now what? We have to celebrate Christmas in a canteen garbage-can-grey with fat smoking asses like Misses Ugly and Bugle-butt over there in their budget dresses and wigboxes! I swear to God, I thought when coming in here I'd walked into a retro movie," declared Chasuble, tipping his head toward The Krauthammer and Ann Marie Tubb, "thinking oh Christ, *no*—Joan Crawford hairdos from those creepy scenes in *Berserk*!"

He looked at Eyestones.

"What, I'm being too cruel? That's not a dress made of potato starch? You care for *them*, of all people, Eugene? They refer to you as 'Aquarium Eyes.'"

"I thought you forgave them."

"Care to reass*ess*? Two women common as crullers?" It looked as if he were trying to take off a misfitting sweater. "When all of us know how you feel about democracy, Eugene? 'Rule of the cattle, for the cattle, by the cattle,' as Claude Rains playing Napoleon III says in John Huston's talky *Juarez*." He leaned closer. "Speaking of common, did you ever straighten out that business with—"

"—Laura." Eyesones nodded.

"You got to the truth?"

"I did, yes." By the way of the chess knight, he thought. Turn and turn again. *You can't know about truth until you know about deception.*

Chasuble was accompanied by a thin, middle-aged acquaintance of indeterminate sex and haircut with something of a loop-shaped head and dark lipstick. He brought him/her over to Eyestones, quickly whispering low to him, "'I'm so very full of love,' as dying Margaret Sullavan says in *Three Comrades*, 1938," and then in a normal voice, "Allow me to introduce Florian." "I call myself Brenda now," his friend corrected him. He/She had tormented eyes that remained constantly startled and long piercing teeth like an angel-food cake comb-cutter. "Why of course," Chasuble effused. "And aren't we all glad you do." He waved generously toward the room in a feeble attempt to solicit universal agreement. "Don't we all agree that he looks like Raphael's Bindo Altoviti with that Ondine-like face of his and those, oh my goodness, take-me-to-Rio lips?"

"I use Maybelline 'Go Chocolate,'" put in Florian-who-had-changed-his-name-to-Brenda.

"To motor up the Hershey Highway?" asked Gnorm, smarting up his cruel remark by adjusting the butterfly bow tie he wore with his blue ruffled shirt and a bright peach brocade tuxedo that looked almost edible.

Spalatin, giggling, whispered to Varwick, "He doesn't know whether he's Martha or Arthur."

In the meantime, Mr. Fattomale, balancing on a chair with nails in his mouth while trying to rewire a Christmas wreath onto the top of a door, shouted, "Any half-wit there care to pass me the hammer?"

Everyone just airily watched.

"There's no hammer here."

"Little Bob Merkle stole it. I saw him steal it. It's in the belt under his jacket. And he's got meat in his hat!"

"'The blind man shits on the roof and thinks no one sees,' snarled Ratnaster. "An old African proverb."

"Hand it over, bub," said Mr. Fattomale.

"I thought it was mine," said Little Bob Merkle.

Spalatin nudged Discknickers and nodded in the direction of Chasuble's effete friend. "Not my type, I'm afraid," said Discknickers, smooth-stroking his tie with cocky resilience. "I like waifs. Chicks with Yoo-Hoo-colored skin. Booty shakers. Cocoa puffs. 'I am black but comely'—Song of Solomon, 1:5," he quoted. "'O ye daughters—'"

"I thought you paid hookers to come over," goaded The Krauthammer.

"I don't pay hookers to come over," coldly replied Discknickers to no one, flatly turning away from the offending voice, "I pay them to leave." He continued talking, refusing to acknowledge that he had been interrupted. "On the other hand, I did make the huge mistake of going out with a neighbor of Eyestones's who featured my favorite hue, dusky—Harriet T. and her Bizango god—where frankly during, I swear, the longest dinner of my life the young woman in question, a Communist of course, made more speeches than William Jennings Bryan on his best day with me ending up on the dry end of a sexless evening with the very devil's headache." He sipped his drink. "I should have stayed home—" he lasciviously dice-shook his fist "—with Miss Michigan." Spalatin guffawed.

"What smoky shadows! My *sfumato*!" mooed Chasuble, ignoring Discknickers's crude and salacious remarks and framing his new friend's jaw and moving it approvingly from side to side. And he spontaneously sang,

> "Fah-ling een luff a-gane
> Neffer vahnted to,
> Votim I to do?
> Caaaaahn't help eet—"

He stopped abruptly in mid-song, blaming the fact of his being badly off-key to Ann Marie Tubb and The Krauthammer, to drown him out, suddenly bursting into a cacophonous version of "The First Noël." "What about drinks?" As they passed to the bar, Chasuble snatched some paper bunting and quipped to Eyestones, "Crêpe! Leave it to *Quink* for the pudorific! Crêpe! Cheez-Its! Crumbbummery! Real life does indeed lack narrative drive, doesn't it, E^2?" He sighed deeply. "When I think of the many Christmas Eves driving up from New Hope, Pennsylvania, that I spent in New York City where in the standing-room section of the Metropolitan Opera, along with the music, of course, all sorts of things go on. All the men are conveniently jammed in, up close, you see, and," he lolled his tongue on his lip, "they love to bang the bongs! Oh Eyestones, we live in such dull, parlous times! So hamhanded and common! Why not for us civilized places like Le Cirque or Pavillon or La Rue?"

Discknickers replied, "Civilized is who you are." He sniffed. "Do you know what the meaning of looking 'spruce' is?" He took a long disapproving look at Chasuble's clothes and shot his cuffs. He raised an eyebrow in a whimsical vertex. "No. No, you wouldn't." He snapped his fingers at the bartender. "Another Gumpold."

"I may be hefty, but—"

"Fat as a bubble," said Discknickers.

Chasuble looked hurt. "But rudeness is not—"

"'Press one to leave a message,'" roboticked Disknickers in mechanical telephonese. "'Press two to access your pin number. Press three to speak to an illiterate. Press four to get thoroughly annoyed. Press five to repeat yourself.'"

Muskrat, already half-drunk, scandalously dressed in a low-cut blouse, shiny scarlet hot-pants, and a pompom-topped Santa's Helper cap, was uninhibitedly dancing under a sprig of mistletoe over a doorway and screaming lewdly, "Who wants to slam the trunk?" No one was paying the slightest attention to her.

"Would that we could be transported back thirty years to the Colony," asked Chasuble, "that luxurious half-century-old restaurant and bar at 30 East 61st Street, drinking wine-coolers not with people like that witless pornofulgofanatic wearing night-jewelry over there doing her Rite of Spring but with several of those splendid decadents like Fulco di Verdura and Van Day Truex and Carl Van Vechten with a train of bold, sexful Ethiops in gold shimmering shirts jigging in his wake, or dancing all night at the Hotel New Yorker to the Johnny Long Orchestra playing 'Junior' or 'Waiting for the Train to Come In' or 'Prove It by the Things You Do.' *Utinam, utinam, utinam.* I do hate history, but I confess I like to make it."

Eyestones looked at his watch.

"What's the problem, Eyestones, you want to leave already? Or on this Christmas night don't you want to be 'certained'—whatever the fuck that means—like those poor shepherds in fields where they lay? I cannot believe that double-talk. Who doesn't want to be certained when he—or she," he lasciviously wagged his tongue at Muskrat, "is getting laid in a field?" It was Minot Warholic, who having blown in dressed up like Santa Claus, began galumphing about the crêpe-strewn room with a garbage-bag rucksack and acting the perfect fool. He resembled in his great fatness an oversized butcher's dog. His Mongolian-shaped eyes, made even more narrow by his burgeoning

cheeks, gave him away. The cigarette drooping from his lip was stained with spittle. His teeth looked crowded and ugly. "Or are you thinking about those attacks on you and your writing in the Boston *Globe*?"

Eyestones said, "Smallest sphere on earth."

"You mean," ask Spalatin, "where in order to be a columnist or reporter the only requirements are to have flat shoes, one change of clothes, and a ninth-grade education?"

"Jealousy helps. And of course small-mindedness and weasel-like grudges. Fair play is to columnists there what taxes are to the citizens of New Hampshire."

"Oh good, nobody here but people," said Mutrux, who entered the room wearing a sedum-pink long-sleeved shirt with a big hairy-furred vest. "Merry Christmas."

"*Buon Natale*," chirped Mr. Fattomale, dipping a small biscotti into his vinsanto.

"*Mele Kalikimaka*," said Gnorm, making hula hands and doing a South Pacific hipswerve.

"*Gut yuntif*, dipshits!" bellowed Warholic, flinging down his fat bag. He blew down the trumpet of his nose, which was cross-hatchedly red-tipped like one of those Edward Koren cartoons. "Figure this! Walking through all those thigh-high snowdrifts outside gets me horny! I feel like a fox ready to clickit! Look, everybody's here," he said, pointing to himself: "King!" then pointing to Chasuble, "Queen!" pointing to Ann Marie Tubb, "Full!" and to Spalatin and Discknickers, "Twins!" He kicked the bag and gestured to all the gathering personnel. "Season's Fucking Greetings to every elf and elfette and a tip of the birthday hat to Jesus Kite who for all of his *faschlecta* ideas—don't look at me!—was killed at the crossings." He quickly produced a take-out carton of rolled herring and began sloppily eating, using his fingers as a fork, his fork as a toothpick.

"What a goddamn psycho," whispered Gnorm.

"You mean *psychro*," said Eyestones.

"Come again?"

"A psychrotentiginous person," clarified Eugene, playing the Sexual Intellectual, "is someone sexually aroused by cold. Don't worry, it's a real word."

With several loud grolches, Warholic wolfed down a last few herring and, after finishing his meal, he sucked his fat fingers in long pulling motions, threw the box away, and raised the glass of beer that

Varwick in the meantime had obsequiously handed him. "Don't you love it? What makes me laugh is the way we wily Ashkenazim have snatched this X-mas holiday away from your fat Christian asses just by sheer fucking intimidation. Put a stone over it, baby! Place a black wreath on it! Seasons Fucking Greetings! Welcome to Vanillaville!" he cackled with a maniacal Richard "Kiss of Death" Widmark laugh. He blasted his nose into a fistful of tissues and, looking in Discknickers's direction, asked, "How's that working out for you, Gauleiter? Read the *Deutsches Volksblatt* today?"

Discknickers archly replied, "A crocodile has a sharp snout and an alligator a round, but some fat bastards have both—at the same time."

"Who? Who?" asked Mr. Fattomale, jumping forward with a scowl, thinking the remark aimed at him who had no teeth in his upper jaw.

"I heard that, Jingle Bells," snarled Warholic to Discknickers. "What, are you irked that your favorite holiday is now nothing but reindeer, ribbons, and red lights? Upset that you cannot call those funky firs 'Christmas' trees anymore? Pissed-off that the chance of finding a religious greeting-card is zero? In a funk because even making a public *reference* to Christmas is now history? Irked that crosses are no more allowed in the public domain?" As usual, once Warholic started talking it was impossible to stop him, simply because his own voice in his ears drowned out all possibilities of interruption. Cackling, he drained the bottle of beer in one long gulp and burped. "What, you're all having a conniption because every city and town in this nation is now legally prevented from publicly putting up those mawkish sheep-and-cowshit manger scenes anymore? Banned like the Caped Jewboy from pubic adoration? Maybe that's why the word *putz* is Pennsylvania Dutch for crèche! Old Rabbi Maggid from Motol warned us against all your Christian tricks. I told you, I know all this shit. At age eleven we began part of the Mishna—the first part of the Talmud in six tractates. Our first studies? In the book Noshim—women! I knew from menstruation and 'cleanliness' at age ten! I tell you, Jew school put me wise. I got the book on Christians, pal. Our old rabbi told us that if a Jew blessed himself like a goy with that wiffle movement over the head and heart all his teeth would fall out! But goodbye to all that for you! No more miraculous stars in the sky! No more wise men on camels shitting on the highways. We won, baby. Do you hear me?"

"Have another drink Warholic," said Discknickers, his chin sharp-

ening in anger and revealing what is known as the frozen limit. "How about some mead, the Jewish national drink?" And putting a hand to his heart he bitterly sang,

> "*Unter die grune Beimelach*
> *Sizzen die Mojschelach, Schlojnelack*
> *Eugen wie gliehende*
> *Keulalalach*."

Discknickers raised his Gumpold and said, "To Oholah of Smaria! To Oholiboa of Jerusalem! The Jewish whores! 'They defiled my sanctuary and desecrated my sabbaths!' Ezekiel 23:38."

"Asshat!"

"Oi-oi-oi, Mr. Plotkin!"

"Scratch the word *Christmas*!" vehemed Warholic. "It is now the 'December Holidays'! We've got you bastards by the balls! Christmas can now suck the gas pipe! Easter? Easter is now bunnyville! Goodbye, Easter Bunny, hello Peter Rabbit! Hallowe'en? Strictly fucking pumpkins and ghosts! Hallowe'en! The Harvest Festival! Even Saint Valentine's Day, thanks to us and the legal pressures we've exerted, is now under challenge and being referred to as 'Special Person's Day'! You can't even find *valentines* to send anymore because now they're called—get this—'messages of caring'! You know what I say? I say screw Saint Valentine! Forget all that hokey Christian shit you've been shoving down our throats for centuries, OK? It is no mystery how we got away with it, all right? Half of the people in this country are fucking sheep and the other half are dumber than a box of rocks and don't even have a clue! All the world's divided into Jews and pathetic *shkutzim* the way I see it, Jack, don't give me all that *fenegalah* shit. We've got all the money and have cornered all the power and out-and-out own all the media monopolies in order to tell you poor ignorant Presbyterian and Baptist and Catholic fucks what to do and how to think and we're going to make you love it! Did you hear what I said? Love it! *Shlog zich kop in vant*, chozzer!" Warholic bent over and yanking a few boxes of cheap candy out of his sack to throw at people finished his most un-Santalike tirade with one last loud honk of disfellowshipping lunacy into Discknickers's face. "Not Krist but Kris Kringle is the new slogan! Dump all them crisses and crosses, walyo! The miracle to me is that all of you flying assholes and faggots even know that Mr. Miracle back

there in Bethlehem was a Jew himself. A Red Sea pedestrian." He farted and laughed. "A landsman, part of the *mishpocha*, a M.O.T.—a Member of the Tribe. A player in the old game of Jewish geography, all right, I'll have to give you that, but never *unsereiner*, OK? Never one of us. Not him. I myself personally can't stand the bastard and never could and I am not alone. Forget that we finally got rid of public nativity scenes, we even got the ACLU to pass laws prohibiting the singing of Christmas carols in American schools, including that idiotic song 'Kumbaya,' which mentions the so-called Lord!"

"Coyotero!"

"What degree of stupid do you people have to be not to see that we *rule*? Christmas," he bugled, "is now officially sca-*rapped*, so live with it, Discknickers. Don't you just love it! Say amen! Kids in this country nowadays don't know the words to 'Silent Night'! We've already got B.C. and A.D.—*anno domine*, ante up your fucking dominoes!—stricken from the history books, an insult all Jews have had to put up with since Jumped Up Jesus in his union suit but with no ready cash or good legal advice got his raggedy ass tacked up on that boomerang! And so? Right. You couldn't pay me to care!"

"On December 21, 1952," retorted Discknickers, "that horsefaced Levite George S. Kaufman on a television panel show said, 'Let's make this one program where no one sings "Silent Night"'and got his ugly ass fined the next day."

"I'd have given him a medal!"

Warholic reached over, crassly forked one, two, three cheese knishes, wolfed them down in a mouthful, and spat angrily through the crumbs, "Happy Hanukkah!"

"Hanukkah?" queried Discknickers the supersessionist. "A ninth-rate festival celebrating a streetcorner fistfight in ancient Jewville. As a feast it ranks lower on the scale of world history than fucking Groundhog Day! A skirmish of squirrels! I might also remind you that the day was nothing but a ferial burp until the 1950s, roughly the calendrical equivalent of Lee–Jackson Day down South, when your craven and envious crowd got a brainstorm and, typically scheming to dilute as much as possible our Christian holyday which is the pivotal point of history, came up with this bit of bollocks about the importance of the ancient Maccabees in order to fit the seasonal competition, the only Jewish festival, let me remind you, *not* mentioned in the Old Testament! Can you believe it?"

Mutrux and Gnorm agreed and laughed. "Total horseshit!"

"Clowns to the left of me," said Warholic, blackly, "jokers to the right."

"He's right," muttered Ratnaster, kicking a fallen wreath across the room.

"And stuck in the middle with you."

"Never *once* mentioned," said Discknickers with glee.

"Lies," snapped the editor, digging in.

"It's true. Ask Spalatin."

"He couldn't hit a bull in the arse with a scoop shovel."

"Or Varwick."

"Who thinks that manual labor is a Mexican?"

"It's a holiday dumber than Kwanzaa with its sticks and stones and moss, the point-of-entry for black people at Christmas to scream and celebrate *anything*!"

Warholic arm-farted and said, "Die, goyboy!"

Duxbak, saddened at all the noise, walked to a distant window and looked out meditatively.

"Oh please," said Discknickers. "Don't talk to me about the Maccabees. They were nothing but thugs and thieves, full stop. The reign of this revolting family was characterized for more than a century by a succession of kings as cruel and as depraved and as corrupted by a lust for power as any of the worst of the Seleucid emperors who by the way happened to be their vile contemporaries. Don't tell *me*! The Maccabees conquered strictly by the sword and actually forced their victims to accept Judaism in the same brainless way that you're force-feeding those cheese knishes into your pie-hole, See-Through Socks! Do you happen to own a history book? All of the sons and daughters of the Maccabees fought like lackeys among themselves in one bloody internecine war after another and for your information, Shabatmeister, it was by the invitation of those very Maccabees—since one faction of them traitorously conspired with Rome, of course, for deceit is to Jews what cabbage is to Koreans—that the fearsome and death-dealing legions of Rome got their first foothold in the land of Judea, eventually to destroy the country completely, but not before out of that black political chaos arose, from one of the same conquered groups that had been subjected to forced conversion, the tyrant that was the half-Jew Herod, a scumball puppet whose foul origins went no higher than the sewer-rat family. He was a worthless man-balloon, of course,

just another political jockey in a pointed hat. He was a pickpocket and a drummer like all of you," said the rude accountant. "Dishonesty becomes a Jew like a red bridle does a white horse."

"Goatfucker," spat Warholic.

"Jeruselem back then was nothing but a lousy little stickerpatch filled with weeds, a few houses on a crooked hillside."

"You're a fucking *hazzan*."

"All that bullshit about the massive size of the ancient Hebrew cities! King Solomon's grand city on a hill, my arse! Back when the Torah was cobbled together around 275 B.C., all the criers and kibitzers who were impressed with everything they heard by way of the gossip of the camel trains and sea traders and spice-route caravans of the rich and powerful Hellenistic cities simply went and falsely attributed them to the Jewish kingpins of the tenth, ninth, and eighth centuries B.C. who needed all the glory they could get as if those self-important wishpits were King Fucking Lear! The covetous, skeptical Jews even back then believed in virtually *nothing*. All that palaver about waiting for the Messiah? All cobblers! Are you aware that it is literally impossible to produce a single iota of scholarly evidence of the absolute use of the term מָשִׁיחַ in pre-Christian Judaism? I happen to know about this shit, and you do not. There is not a single passage in a single work by any of your people where the term Messiah can be held with any probability to apply to any figure expected to appear in the future. Only much later in the Apocalypse of Baruch and Ezra, around A.D. 100, that is, after the destruction of the Temple, did the Jews as if by magic come up with this competing idea after the death of Christ that *their* Messiah would come. The concept was completely fabricated out of whole cloth in feeble competition of the Christian idea, the way that you sheenies out of nothing but religious envy use the totally insignificant feast of Hanukkah, one not even mentioned in the Torah, to compete with the world-wide celebration of Christmas. It's political, see? It is typical of the Jews to over-egg the pudding. There's not enough unless there's more. You people did it when you filched Palestine from the Arabs, as the world stood indifferently by. Fashion a flag, then steal a country. Coot follows hern. Where there is a sign, there is a system." Discknickers quickly looked around in vain to try to spot Eyestones, for had he not recently pointed out to him that Christ had quite unambiguously declared his Messiahship to that vile congregation of hateful and murderous rabbis in that synagogue in his home

town of Nazareth? "The Jews coldly rejected Jesus Christ for the sole reason that he promised them a heavenly kingdom and not an earthly one, for they wished for a Messiah who would exalt them in triumph above all nations in the *world* and not some blinkered and paradoxical Galilean with a mouthful of vague, pie-in-the-sky promises for eternal salvation in a remote heaven. In the Torah the title *Moshiach* was employed as a sort of honorific or appellation for whatever king was reigning at the time, especially to David and his dynasty—David Monarch! King of Israel! Anointed King! King Messiah!—and sometimes it was given to the nation personified, but it was never, never, not once, applied to the 'coming redeemer.' The Jews in the pre-Christian world would have given that name to any potentate in a bright dalmatic, including any fat Sadducee on a white ox! Are you depressed?" inquired a mocking Discknickers. "The fact is that the Gospel of Saint John is the only New Testament document that uses the term Messiás, a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic *Meshiha* which derives from the Hebrew *ha-Mashiah* which is translated as *Christos*, a sacred term meaning 'anointed' or 'anointed king' which takes its honorable place everywhere else in the Gospel. Do you get it now?"

"Nazi trash!" barked Warholic. "Stormtrooper! Christian superfascist!"

"*Christians* are the fascists?" asked Discknickers, angrily thinking about the so-called "scandal of particularity," Israel's sense of exceptionalism. "The Jews are among the worst chauvinists in the history of man! 'I believe in our moral and intellectual superiority,' boasted David Ben Gurion of his people. Does that come as any surprise to you—words spoken not by Joseph Goebbels or Julius Streicher or Reinhard Heydrich or any of the German *Übermensch* but rather the quack sentiment of the first Prime Minister of Israel! Elie Wiesel, that professional shill of the Holocaust, in his books *Against Silence* and *And the Sea*—there is no business like Shoah business!—without missing a single beat boasts that the Chosen People, the Jews, are 'ontologically exceptional.' Correct! As agents, lawyers, tax weasels, accountants, producers, cagey sutlers, corporate hustlers, and double-dealing middlemen! In his autobiography *Trial and Error,* Chaim Weizman repeatedly thrills to the vile boast that some Jew facing a Gentile 'routs him in argument.' The hack novelist Edna Ferber who was like a perfect scold with a raised stick always complaining that images of Jesus Christ's crucifixion had a baleful effect on millions of Jewish children—what,

Hassids are *normal* looking?— not only gloats in her autobiography *A Peculiar Treasure* that the Hebrews of old were alone of all others 'smart enough to know that all the Levitical and Deuteronomic dietary laws regarding pork and shellfish were necessary in a hot climate where foods decay' but that Jews as personal companions were actually 'more exhilarating' than everyone else. These are not the remarks of racists and bigots? Where is the outrage? That fat demagogue Norman Podhoretz with his usual mouthful of apocalyptic twaddle humbly asserts that the Jews are not only the vehicle of Yahweh's message—and Normie Poddy from downtown Flatbush would naturally be the one to divine the mind of the Creator of the World, don't you agree?— but that they are the people specifically chosen to redeem the whole fucking world, illogically adding, 'Why else did they survive?' Why did green tortoises survive? Redwoods? Glaciers? Horseshoe crabs? Look at it any way you want," said Discknickers, after taking a long suck of his drink, "those are the premeditated remarks of scientific racists. Check out the facts, balloon man."

"*Putznasher!*" howled Warholic.

"You talk about Hitler? The racist Rabbi Ezra—that meazled Old Testament crotchbox—employed the very same methods as *der Führer* did and could have worked for the SS! He forbade mixed marriages and allowed only those to return to Judea who could point to their birth registration as providing irrefutable proof that they were of Judean extraction or members of the family of Aaron or of the tribe of Judah.

"We are the Chosen People."

"'Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits,' Christ told the chief priests and the Pharisees—Matthew 21:43—who immediately sought to kill him."

"Truffle pig!"

"Shipswallower."

"Rumpswab!"

"I'm sorry," said Discknickers, using his robotic computerized telephone voice. "'I'm having trouble understanding you. Let me transfer you to an agent.'"

"Fuckhead."

"The Jews are so-called, it is said, because they were the first people to believe in one God. 'The eternal our God is one'! Pure banana oil,

Mr. Woodears," said *Der Schwarze Adler*, fixing a cuff. "Amenophis IV of Egypt—Ikhnaton to you, *floruit* 1375 B.C.—was a monotheist before anyone on earth, so you people plagiarized from the Egyptians. In any case, for entire centuries the hypocritical Israelites worshipped, not Yahweh, but pagan Baal in order to insure good crops for themselves. Haven't you read Hosea 2? Gideon was known as Jerub-baal which means 'let Baal contend.' Saul and David gave Baal names to their children! Mephibaal! Ishbaal! Jonathan had a sister named Meribaal! One of David the psalmist's own daughters was named Beeliada! I Chronicles 14:7. Faith? Forget it! Fidelity? Non-existent! I tell you, Jews believe in hard cash, not immortality. The only clear statement about the resurrection of the dead in the Torah occurs in the book of Daniel, the last riddling work in the Masoretic text that was written around165 B.C. or so during the so-called Maccabean revolt. Don't quibble with me, I *know* this shit. At some point in your lives you people should really do yourselves a favor and sit down at a south-facing window and let the sun shine in!" Discknickers pointed Jeremiah-like at Warholic and proclaimed with the voice of a hectoring prophet, 'Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life and some to the reproach of eternal abhorrence.' The Chosen People?" he sardonically asked. "That's what you Yiddles never seem to get. Read Colossians 3:12 and learn the good news." Setting down his drink, he folded his hands in mock prayer, and bowed. "Adjust howitzer: deflection, quadrant, pull the lanyard—boom!" He blew air and said, "You're saponifiable fat!"

"Islamo-fascist vermin!" hooted the bloated Santa Claus, tripping over his voluminous clothes while trying to bite the thumb he threw as a gesture at his smug foe. "I curse the ground you *schwachsinniger* walk on!"

Discknickers ignored him. "Surely Karl Marx was correct when he asserted, 'The Jews are not a race nor do they have a religion.' He said, 'They are purely an economic group of usurers. What is the cult of the Jews? Bargaining. What is their worldly god? Money.' OK, sweetheart? And that's one of *your own* talking! Israel Zangwill with a lament once remarked, 'If you want to compliment a Jew, tell him he does not look like one! What a depth of degradation for a people to have reached.' Do you hear that? That's *another* one of your own talking! One of your own, did I say? Amos the Hebrew prophet himself in the name of the living God vociferously and unequivocally declared to the Jews, his

own people, 'You are no better to me than the Ethiopians!'"

Someone at the party threw a bun in the direction of Discknickers's head, but he did not even flinch as he continued his rant. "Why all the scorn and obloquy? You people have had a reputation for more than two thousand years now. Why else do you think you have been hated for millennia? Did you ever pose that question to yourselves? *Why*? There is no end to Jewish chicanery. Are you aware of one of the ingenious frauds perpetrated when settling Israel back in 1948? Zionist leaders insisted that all Jews with European or American surnames immediately adopt new names as a disguise. Why? Why, to give what was once Palestine but now Israel more of a 'Hebrew' flavor. In that very first year of that artificial country's existence, and it began with the army, more than 20,000 people changed their names. *All new people, all aliases, all masks.* Talk about miming citizenship! 'No officer will be sent abroad in a representative capacity unless he bears a Hebrew family name,' proclaimed the European David Gruen who became by the transmogrifying *chutzpah* of his own bold if flatulent self-fiat the Middle Eastern David Ben Gurion! They all did it. It was done by Goldie Meyerson who became Golda Meir! By Shimon Persky who became Shimon Peres! By name-whatever-one-or-ten-or-twenty-or-thirty of those yammering, long-winded, white-collared toucans in the Knesset you want whose nose could double for an umbrella hook!"

"*Mamzer* asswipe!" Warholic tore at his hair with anger. "Your mother should wake up tomorrow morning dripping with the Ebola virus!"

"The Jew is all about tricks," happily continued Discknickers, taking up the ball thrown at him. "To be a Jew you must have a Jewish mother. Simple. Motherhood, you see, is easy to establish, whereas fatherhood, you see, is always open to question. As the Latin proverb goes, *Mater certa, pater incertus.* What an utter forgery, however, that this is cited as evidence of the high esteem in which women are supposedly held in the Jewish community." He paused to look in Eyestones's direction for sympathetic corroboration, but he had gone out for a breath of fresh air a half an hour before. "In fact it reflects the toleration of a sexual double-standard completely alien to women's equality, so that Jewish males can screw any women they want, including any Gentile woman, concubine, trull, or trollop they want, creating in the process no end of *mamzerin*—bastards—which was the original *premise* of that 'mother law,' as if you couldn't guess it. That is what the Jews call 'hon-

dling'—wheeling and dealing! Now can you see why the answering machine was invented and for whom? It was created in 1935 expressly for the convenience of the world's Orthodox Jews who, forbidden to answer the telephone on the Sabbath, still wanted to make deals. So the Casio company obligingly came out with a ten-pound monstrosity for them, a prestidigitating end-run around God and his laws in order not to lose business! To fool most people you have to get up early in the morning. To fool a Jew you can't go to bed. Trust me, not with their unsleeping malevolence. What other people in drawing straws with Jehovah would try to stick him with the short one? I rest my case, as the French horn player said when he missed the last bus."

The Christmas spirit was waning, with everyone growing glum. It needed renewal.

"Why is money green?" asked Discknickers.

"You piece of shit."

"Because Jews pick it before it's ripe."

"Bigot!"

"I once saw a Jewish store on First Avenue with a sign out front, 'Free Shoes—Buy 1, Get 1 Free!'"

"Prick," snarled Warholic. "Fucking meatmilk!"

"Why do you hate them so?" asked Varwick.

"To be honest, I didn't always. But they weren't always what they are. Or so it seems. The Jews, according to Earl Shorris in *Jews Without Mercy,* one of my favorite books, once stood for justice, decency, honor, and fair-play. 'If Moses had seen a Jew beating an Egyptian workman,' asks Shorris, 'what would he have done? According to Rashi's count, the answer is found thirty-six times in the Pentateuch—that is how much importance Scripture lays on the prohibition against the mistreatment of a stranger.' Once ethics mattered to them, now money alone does. Zionists who seem to have an almost lascivious need to screw people out of their hope as well as their land are erasing *themselves* as an entity. In their wiles those unappeaseable overreachers who know no bounds will one day be bounded in a nutshell. Shorris, a Jew himself perspicaciously writes, 'A man who declares himself a Jew and also declares that mercy is the opposite of justice negates the first declaration with the second.' Now that has all changed. Look at the brutal way that Eretz Israel and the American Jews by fiat treat the Palestinians, the bleak and desperate poor living in hovels there who with not a thing to hope for are now forced into the concentration camps of their

land. All you weasels have gone and stolen 70 percent *more* of the meager land already scrimply ceded them in 1948 on top of the prime seaside land that had already been given you—and then rat-wise, raced to build on that land, the quicker to claim and keep it. Wearing your white *kipas* and black pistols in your belts, you have built a freakishly long wall of apartheid, seized the city of Jerusalem, stomped with your muddy feet all over the holy Dome of the Rock, illegally annexed land and built on the West Bank and Gaza—what Professor Edward said called 'geographical violence'--and then shamelessly try to defend this criminal behavior by telling the world, 'God decrees this!' Then, where does United States aid go? To racist Israel, not to the Palestinians! We killed *three million* Vietnamese during that war. What aid did we give them? Not a farthing! You don't even try to hide your naked deviltry. Savagery today is the sound of the shofar!

"I tell you, the Palestinians will rise again. And why, you ask? I will respond simply by pointing to the very same laws that in dealing with them you would break and the very same laws you would usurp." As he spoke, Discknickers hastily pointed at Mutrux for a nod of legal corroboration. "*Ex dolo malo oritur actio*: A right of action cannot arise out of as fraud! *Consensus tollit errorem*: Acquiescence of any party who would seek to take advantage of an error obviates its effect! *Nihil tam conveniens est naturali aequitati quam quodque dissolvi eo ligamine quo liquatum est*: Nothing is so consonant to natural equity as that every contract should be dissolved by the same means which rendered it binding! Start there. Try those out for yourself. You can be certain in the end that justice will prevail. In the meantime, people, the Jews who have always loudly claimed to be the opposite of the Nazis will change one day. We believe that, right?" Discknickers laughed bitterly. "One misty moisty morning. One misty fucking moisty morning," he repeated, ostentatiously performing the theatrically famous foot-shuffle ta-da-and-a-handshake routine that silent-movie comedian Harold Lloyd in *The Freshman* repeated with comic effect to everybody's delight. The partygoers all laughed and, carrying their drinks, drifted toward the food.

A table at the center of the room was filled with plates of turkey, meatballs, a bowl of salads and hors d'oeuvres at one end, and at the other bottles of spirits and a phalanx of mixers, soda, and tonic water. Real candles gave a festive air to the spread, and a big green wreath with bows stood in the middle as a centerpiece. A bartender was busy serving drinks to shouted orders from the group. Ann Marie Tubb and

The Krauthammer stood apart by themselves drinking Scotch and popping olives and tucking into plates of fish. Seeing them, Discknickers said, "Delighted to see Crate and Barrel are here."

"'Round numbers are always false,'said Dr. Sam Johnson," said Mr. Fattomale. "Never get between Mr. Tubb and a tray of smoked salmon," said Gnorm to Mutrux, knowingly elbowing him. "I can't stand watching a woman eat," said Discknickers, turning as he raised his drink to bow toward Eyestones who had come back in. "All right, Electrical Engineering, what will you have? 'Similar,' as they say at all the smart bars?"

Spiked punch was flowing. Old carols were playing. Lights sparkled. A dry spruce, the worst kind of Christmas tree to buy, was dropping its needles in a corner. In the meantime, at Warholic's bullying behest someone began taking up a collection for Squishy who in an unnatural eurhythmic maneuver involving, while upside-down, trying libidinously to lick the chines of her stomach had broken an ankle pitchpoling off a burlesque stage in the Combat Zone. Wearing a white fur sweater and lipstick, Larry Clucker, completely bombed, was horizontal in a corner lying in a gundalow of salt-hay that he had mischievously brought in earlier as a nativity prop and, pretending he was the Baby Jesus, squeakysquealed retardedly,

> "O tan my bum, O tan my bum,
> I've taken off my leathers!"

"Psssst, don't leave early. I've got something to show you," Little Bob Merkle whispered to Discknickers as he passed the hat not only to avoid contributing a single cent but in order to pocket—when no one was looking—a quick couple of twenties. Discknickers turned to see Ann Marie Tubb bent over a table as if in obeisance, her face almost salaciously reviewing the fish, and, mindful of I Samuel 1:13-15, he asked in disgust, "Is she praying or is she drunk?" Spalatin woofed in laughter, holding up a mackerel and comically peering into its pointed face cross-eyed. "Mirror as metaphor," said Discknickers. "You can't get uglier than that! My God," he quipped, and turning to Warholic he pusillanimously added, "*or* Gee-dash-dee, if you're Jewish. What are you drinking, Kosher Cabernet bottled in Manhattan, according to most sane oenophiles the worst drink on the planet?"

"Season's Greetings!" announced Warholic, holding up a glass of

punch. "And a Happy New Year—year 5760 for the Hebrews!"

"What did the yid say to the sheeny? Are you wearing a lid or sporting a beanie?"

"Go back to Oberammergau," said Warholic with bear paws opening another beer, "and get nailed to a tree!"

"'Hows about buying a pal a dwink?' as Dietrich says in *Seven Sinners*," said Chasuble to Eyestones, affectionately touching his sleeve.

"Please. Anything you'd like." Eyestones said to the bartender, "I'll have a Cutty Sark, and he'll—"

"That's what Garbo drank. 'No water. *I don't vaahnt to rust*,'" sibilated Chasuble, closing his eyes and dramatically clutching his breast. "Speaking of drinks, Eyestones, what movie is this from? 'Hey, Zeke, where's my peppermint and soda?'" He waited. "You don't know? I don't believe it. I do not believe it. Not a clue? Nothing? I even thought I helped you out by throwing in as a hint that famous wintry accent! Oh, dear me! Answer: Charles Bickford! *Duel in the Sun*. All right, I'll try you out with one more. Who orders a double Calvados for two in what interminable post-World War II movie with—a major hint—like about fifty-two endings?" Chasuble waited and then putting on some French pastry quoted, "'All I can gif you iss my looove in this bitter present.' That doesn't help? Suave Charles Boyer as Ravik drinking with Bergman in *Arch of Triumph*, 1948." He tittered. "Let's see now, what to drink," he said, turning to his sexless new friend. "Would you like a Dos Camino? A strawberry basil margarita with tequila, fresh lime, sugar, and strawberries, mmm? Or a Peanut Butter and Jelly, which is two ounces of Frangelico, one ounce Chambord, one ounce cranberry juice? It is so *you*! How about a Django, a Nong, or a Tao?"

"What is that?" asked Brenda, no, Florian.

"A Tao? Absolut Kurant, Chambord, and pineapple juice. Quite yummy, really."

"Let me think."

Eyestones offered, "Try a Mao-Tai, the Chinese toasting libation. It is notoriously high-proof. Nixon got blotto sipping only one on his 1972 expedition."

"I'll order what Claudette Colbert gave suave Ray Milland to drink in *Arise, My Love*: champagne and green mint," said the movie critic, fussily drumming the bar with fluttering fingers. "Lovely, oh and do use the tall champagne flute for me, thank you. I once asked for one of those at Welfare's, don't you know, but I might just as well have been

talking to myself." He turned to the odd, egg-headed friend by his side, Florian, who after touching up his mahogany lipstick swept a hand over her echt Joan of Arc haircut. "Please, have just a sip of my bubbly. It's what the doctor gave Colbert on the *Île de France*, E², remember? And then of course she passes it on to Ray Milland, whereupon of course they wonderfully dance"—here he twirled his little pinkie finger around and around—"while she of course gorgeously sings 'Dream Lover' like nobody else and I mean no damn body! I positively live for such moments. As for instance in *Spellbound*, speaking of Bergman, where although all of them get that Freudian stuff all terribly muddled and laughably wrong—anyone see it?—we still get to hear Bergman pronounce the word 'liverwurst' with . . . such . . . breath . . . -y . . . passion! *Leeevorevuuurst.*" He was emoting big-time. "What do you think of my pendant, Florian? I have always had a weakness for peridot in sterling silver."

"I call myself Brenda now," corrected his friend.

"Excuse me?"

"Not Florian. Brenda."

"Or Bren*dan*," said Mutrux, smirking at everybody.

"Why not try a Sirocco," solicitously asked Chasuble. "A straight brandy with a cherry. Charlotte Greenwood, she of the high-kicking long legs, whom I just adore, drinks one in *Down Argentine Way*, where with her yellow purse and all sorts of millinery creations she is at her most deliciously peppery."

"I thought she drank a Blackout," said his friend.

"Ong-wray. She *mentions* a Blackout, a straight gin with a black olive. Or you could try one of those eight-ingredient cocktails — or was it a liqueur? — that my charmpot and brava Madeleine Carroll with cheekbones out to here orders at the beginning of *My Favorite Blonde*? Look! He's speechless!" Chasuble squeezed his friend and forcibly squeezed their cheeks together. "Don't you just *love* him?"

"I'll have what that womanish lower-class consumer sissy is *not* having," said Gnorm, darkly.

"Stereotype alert," giggled Little Bob Merkle.

"What about an Alaskan Polar Bear? Buddy Love drinks one in *The Nutty Professor*."

"'One juice of the orange' as Charlie Chan used to say," said Duxbak, smiling. He took his drink, poured in vodka, and toasted everyone.

"Gimme a beer," ordered Spalatin.

Varwick said, "Any Pol Roger champagne?"

"Are you pulling my leg?" asked Ratnaster. "At Warholic's Christmas party?"

"That's what Churchill drank."

Chasuble sipped his drink, raised his glass, and said, "God bless. Enjoy."

"Oh stuff it, will you, for chrissakes?" grumbled Discknickers. "I've told you a million times I *hate* those fucking hortatory Yiddishisms."

"Want to sit at the bar with me, R. Bangs?" asked Gnorm. "I'll turn the stool upside-down."

Spalatin yelled, "Butt burglar!"

"Pillow-biter," said Gnorm.

"Wuss bunny," snarled Larry Clucker, his big head sticking up out of a kerchief like a huge white tombstone. He scratched his unshaven face.

"What's an IUD for homosexuals?" asked Gnorm. "A fruit loop! A fruit loop!"

As they all hooted and began gulping down their drinks, Chasuble felt the thunderclouds forming and decided to leave. Ridicule is the most difficult form of martyrdom, thought Eugene, who hated the cynicism that was always bad at the office, but at Christmastime? It was not at all surprising that Duxbak did not want to come. "'What a charming evening we might have had, if you had not been a spy and I a traitor,' as Warner Oland says to Dietrich in *Dishonored*," quoted Chasuble to Eyestones, leaning over to add, "and then shoots himself! Don't you just love it?" Then grabbing the tall thinglet who came with him by the front of his belt and walking him toward the front door, R. Bangs Chasuble waved and shouted to all, "Love ya, mean it, got to go."

And they were gone.

As everyone shouted loudly after them and began throwing things in their wake, Little Bob Merkle, who was noted for his ability to enter a revolving door behind you and come out in front, quickly called Discknickers over to a far corner. From behind the door of the coat-check room, he pulled out a large paper bag, checked around dodgily to be sure they were alone, then reached in—he paused dramatically—and took out a black leather jacket. "I bought this jacket from Laura Warholic. Take a good look at it. Nice, huh? You have style. You know

quality. Appreciate good clothes. I'll sell it to you for a song. Look. All tooled. Genuine cowhide. Hide as smooth as butter. Notice the Indian head on the sleeve. Classy, no? It's fantastic. I was going to bring it to the Garment District for major bucks. It's yours for $150." Discknickers looked it over, felt the nap of it, and saw the name *The Craven Slucks* on the arm. "I've heard that name somewhere. Where? Right, Eyestones once mentioned it to me. I don't want the thing. Maybe he'll buy it." He moved to shove past him.

Little Bob Merkle cut him off. "Anything else you're looking for?? Can I interest you in old photographs? Amish fire-tools? A wooden Confederate canteen? Bloater paste? A nice pair of size 13 bluchers? Paper? Ephemera? How about a real headstone? I've got a headstone for someone named Geraldine Oikle."

Discknickers abruptly walked away.

The party was by now in full swing. Some were dancing to Christmas carols, while others, half drunk, ran about in mad abandon. At one point, Spalatin dove headlong out of the front window for his underwear and trousers after Mutrux and Discknickers had depantsed him. The Krauthammer said Mr. Fattomale had unequal laugh-lines and claimed that both halves of his face mismatched. Ratnaster rudely called Ann Marie Tubb a *poule*. Toting his bag, Little Bob Merkle sidled up to Eyestones and showed him just the front of the black leather jacket with the Indian head on it. "I'll sell it to you cheap: two hundred bucks," pitched the avaricious little crainquebille, floating a price. "No questions asked. Discknickers mentioned that you knew the Craven Slucks. Or heard of them. Something like that?" Eyestones shook his head and said, "Not me. But I know someone who does." "I gotta have cash," said the peddler. Eyestones said he would think about it, but what he wanted now more than anything was to leave. "It's a bargain." Meanwhile, Muskrat, the red jewel in her tooth sparkling, was dancing half-naked on a high table and periodically mooning the people who ignored her. Cutely kerchiefed Larry Clucker in the company of two ferrety-faced teenage godforgones he met in the hotel, Andy and Sudsy, were lugubriously handspringing around dressed like angels, all of them screaming in tandem, "*We're putti in your hands*! *We're putti in your hands*!" Discknickers, who was on his fifth Campari-and-soda, proclaimed, "If Christians are prevented from having nativity scenes in public, will someone with a spine please stand up and tell me why all state employees, including Moslems, Mormons, Mongrels—*aaaand*

all those hideously bearded *evrei*!—get the full fucking day off on December the 25th?"

"A champagne toast," squeaked drunken Varwick, mistakenly yanking up a bottle of seltzer water. "A champagne toast!"

"Oscar Wilde's favorite champagne was golden Dagonet," said Gnorm. "Fagwater!"

"I won't drink it. Hitler disliked champagne—more accurately denominated *méthode champenoise* sparkling wine, by the way—and so do I," replied Discknickers who regretted there was not a mirror handy as he took a moment correctly to box his pocket handkerchief. He who was on the permanent knife-edge of obsession mentioned apropos nothing that the Führer also loved éclairs, blonde girls, dirndls, had not been respected as a serious builder, let General Paulus off too easily after the defeat at Stalingrad while he himself had insisted on the Ardennes offensive, and that in 1943—

"*Arumshlepn zolt ir zich über der velt!*" cried an infuriated Warholic with scarlet eyes, cursing Discknickers. He was crazily puffing a cigar that gave off a burnt electric smell. "May you go wandering across the world in your birthday suit and find yourself miserable, like without a hint of hope in your hole! You A-rab *putz*! May you—"

Discknickers raised his glass. "To Chmielnitzi!"

"Who?" asked Varwick. "Who?"

"Beats me," said Mr. Fattomale.

Spalatin giggled, "Where does he get these things?"

"Aren't you eating, Eugene?" asked Discknickers, who saw him surveying the food but touching nothing. "Such a boychik! Nice soup, eh bubela? Piece of fruit? You want kreplach? Some salty lox? Oily sable? Dry whitefish? Sweet picked salmon? Tsimmes for everybody wearing onegs and kiddishes! I'm kvelling you stand there! You van shmatten? I got shmatten! Such a deal I can give you! Buy a beautiful etrog for Sukkoth?" he sneered, mockingly waggling his index finger up and down in front of his nose. "How about an olt waluable golt vatch from Minsk? Why nut? *Gantze mishpucheh! Gehackte liebe fur essen!* Eat! Eat! Nosh! Nize beby, itt all de rize with milk so Mamma'll gonna tell you a ferry tail from de Pite Piper of Hemilton! Oy veh, don't be meshuggeneh! I should shuddup? You vant I should not? I should shuddup already! Oy gevalt! Such a headache!"

As Little Bob Merkle, meanwhile, was waiting to talk to Eyestones, he tried to sweep up into his pocket some spare change from the bar

when no one was looking, when Warholic who spied him doing so angrily shoved him off the barstool and cried, "You conniving little fuck, you thieving white mouse, you would squeeze the metal of a quarter til the eagle shits—you are worse than my ex-wife, the sexual duty-free shopping mall."

"What a skank," said Spalatin.

"Motorhole," said Varwick.

"Thunderbox," chimed in Mr. Fattomale and made an increasingly widening width-shape with his two big calumniating hands. Warholic then began walking around the room mocking his ex-wife, parodying a camel sluggishly plodding the desert sands, one foot high up, one foot down, and raising his lip with a cruel finger to show his mocking gums. "Dah, *dump*, dah, *dump*, dah, *dump*," he megaphoned. Everybody burst into laughter.

"Are you going to stand for that?" asked Spalatin by way of sardonic reproach. "You had a thing for her once, didn't you?"

"I never loved her, only pitied her," said Eugene, quietly, "which is a comment on me, but from the very beginning no doubt out of my own insufficiencies and loneliness found her so unthinkably alone and so intolerably friendless that the fact alone kept me on her side. Physically, I had no feelings for her, but she insistently came to my rooms, virtually every weekend, for years, occasions when turning her away seemed unkind, rude, and pointless. It is Christmas. I want only to see her happy."

"I want to see some strippers," said Warholic, who flashed his canines like a baboon. "Revitalique! Cat in the Hat! Hornette! Tomata du Plenty! Cheesequake!" His beady, closely spaced eyes narrowed like a sturgeon's, and he added with a twitch of lust, "I swear to Christ I'd pay at least $50,000 large to get a full rubdown from Crayola De Blu. Just one hour with her! I'd pay her in cash! In gold! I'm tired of ugly women."

Discknickers gulped his drink. "I'd pay $50,000 large to keep you fully clothed."

"How about I pay you twice that to win a trip to somewhere else?" He was on his eighth beer. "Paraguay Airlines accommodates Nazis, I've heard." Warholic, snatching off his sweaty Santa Claus cap, looked at Eyestones and said, "Speaking of ugliness, what *do* you hear from River Street? Psychoville. The Giggle House. Nothing? I suspect that with your misguided insistence on principles over expediency you

wouldn't even tell me anything even if you knew. Have it your way. Doesn't matter. But I've got some news for you, E^2. My lawyers have taken their heavy jewsticks out and are going to turn the world back to the year dot for her, do you understand? I've been waiting years for this. I've filed an *ex parte* order against the bitch with her Blistex and kneepads to be delivered early tomorrow morning. A.M.! Revenge is a dish best served up cold. I picked the day to make her most unhappy"—he made a screwing motion with a thrusting fist—"just in case she tries to escape jurisdiction! Flee the country! Leave the state! Head for Pumpkintown! Shoot the moon!"

"Why?" asked Gnorm.

"Why? *Why*, grapehead?" asked Warholic. "Why do they spell King Tut's name backwards? Why doesn't a beagle marry an eagle? Why does hearing national anthems make people cry? Why do you park in a driveway and drive on a parkway? Why does your liver look like a bocce ball?"

"She can change," said Eyestones.

"Change? Laura *Shqumb*?" interposed Mutrux. "Do you know the classic recipe for cooking a coot? 'Put the coot in water with a brick. Boil until the brick is tender. Throw the coot away and eat the brick.'"

"No camel that thin could ever make it across a walkway on Commonwealth Ave.," said Gnorm. "That cadaver, I'd bet my eye-teeth, has to be on heroin."

Thinh, thought Eyestones: the Vietnamese word for toasted rice powder. He recalled Snow. Tuyet. Scent of peonies. Hands warm as bread. "You don't eat the cane, maybe chew it for the juice?" What loss, what sadness.

"Well," needled Warholic, "is she, Eyestones?"

"What?"

"My ex-wife. Does she shoot up?"

"I don't see her. I mean, I haven't seen her for a while." He had heard from some corner or other that she was seeing some Gibeonite—some hewer of wood, drawer of water—but he was not even sure of that. "What are you asking me for? I don't know why she is thin. American culture goes wrong almost everywhere. I have considered that female thinness in general is a form of male imposture in which many women are trying to look like boys or men: lean, muscular, competitive, and, paradoxically, little. Models. Fashion victims. Runway dummies. I've

written about it, don't you recall? Most women who attempt to appear attractive and young, slim, are avoiding the maternal destiny they see as fat and that leaves them susceptible to poverty and abandonment by inconsiderate men. Think about it. Thinness is suicide. It's a woman's way in one sense of becoming a little girl in order to start over again. 'Carry me along, taddy, like you done through the toy fair.'"

"What about Laura Warholic, the Blowpipe? She'd wear a triple EEE shoe, right?"

"And live on a strip of land."

"Baja!"

"How about narrow Chile, the thinnest country in the world," offered Mutrux. "*Or* in Damascus, on the Street Which Is Called Straight, the longest thoroughfare in all of Syria." "The Nile Valley is only seven miles wide, an oasis between two terrible burning deserts. How about that?" Mr. Fattomale said, "She'd eat only with a pickle fork." "Right, and eat only breadsticks," put in Varwick. "Breadsticks." "Cheese straws," said Gnorm. "String cheese," added Larry Clucker, indifferently farting out loud. "Licorice bootlaces. Thin mints. Vermicelli, strand by strand. What about *knackerbrod*: thin oat cakes?" screamed out Ann Marie Tubb, who was totally drunk. So was The Krauthammer, who with slurred speech said, "She'd love to shoot arrows, from narrow bows." She winked. "Through slit windows."

"Oriel windows, you mean?"

"Pedant."

"You should know," snapped Gnorm.

The Krauthammer said, "Merry X-mas, dwarf!"

It became a game. "What else? Oh, she'd always post letters in aperture slots, never at mailboxes."

"And she'd squint."

"And buy elongated hats."

"With feathers."

"She's a jarhead!"

"If she bowled, she'd try for gutter balls."

"Her favorite building would of course be the Times Tower in New York City, right?"

"Hey, Manhattan *itself* is thin, right?"

"With alleys!"

"Which have done as much as anything in cities to make crime possible!"

"She'd favor golf over all other sports for the thin clubs and love the famed twelfth hole at Augusta, the one by Hogan's Bridge, which is not only the hardest hole in the course but the one with the narrowest green: only nine yards wide at its narrowest point."

"She'd drink *angostura*. Bitters. The word means 'narrows,' at least to the literate."

"Was that meant for me, pencil penis?" asked The Krauthammer.

Gnorm barked, "Zeppelin dildo!"

"You know in China," offered Spalatin, laughing, "they say, 'The thinner the chopsticks, the higher the s-social status'." And they all threw breadsticks at him.

Disgusted at all the cruel remarks libeling Laura Warholic, Eyestones beckoned Little Bob Merkle over to one side and told him that, if he was still willing, he had decided to buy the leather jacket with the Craven Slucks's name on it. It was something that she would love. He was frankly surprised to see the rock group's name or identity printed on anything other than a local rock poster. But it was Laura's favorite local band, was it not? God knows, he had heard her mention their name enough, spinning endless stories of how far she had come in liking them, that along with her endless anecdotes recounting the extremes to which she would go to please them, *any* of them! He held up the jacket. Why not buy it for her? Laura had hated so many things that he had given her, from the typewriter to travel books to trinkets, this might merely be another, an exercise in futility. One time he had bought her six or seven Iggy Pop 45s that he would have sworn she would like but that, vitiated by the fact of their being too recent, with one distinct move she set them aside as being worthless.

"How much, then?" asked Eyestones, fingering the jacket and testing the zipper. Merkle studied him with one of those fixed artificial grins that on the surface seem merry but upon reflection reveal a deep cold-heartedness.

"Two fifty," he said, trying it out.

"Two fifty?"

"I could have asked three."

"Would you take a check?"

"No," said Little Bob Merkle, flatly. "Not for that. It's real leather, for chrissakes."

As Eyestones began to walk away, Little Bob Merkle instantly skittered around to confront him. Rubbing his tiny white hands, he cagily

relented. Eyestones shrugged and wrote out a check that he was about to hand over when the little man with an apprehensive squeal leaped forward and simply snatched it.

"Two hundred and fifty?" asked Little Bob Merkle, back-snapping a middle finger—*snap, snap, snap!*—against the thin check as if testing glass, and then, laughing in exclamation, he zipped away in delight.

"To the penny," called Eyestones after him and thought of Robert Frost: *I didn't like the way he went away / That smile! It never came of being gay.*

Warholic meanwhile came blundering over and nudging Eyestones whispered, "I got to get outta this place. Tell me, are you coming over with a bunch of us to the Purple Cucumber? I'll drive you home afterwards if you'd like. Whatever you want, E^2."

"On Christmas Eve?" asked Eyestones. He begged off. Why, as he tried to be invisible, he wondered, shaking his head, did he always seem to be noticeable?

"What, are you waiting for Laura the Lame-o?" Everybody hooted and booed and laughed and began rhythmic clapping. "Call her and cancel." After Warholic stood back as if to assay this man in an evaluating way, squeezing a paddle-like thumb, he took Eyestones aside for a word. He stank of beer. Making calming gestures with his hands and showing the blackness of his mouth, he asked, "What do I have to do to have you come?"

Eugene paused to think. He again recalled with sorrow Laura several times watching the old movie *Scrooge*, once sitting on his bed, hugging a pillow, and hiccupping with deep sobs, one of the saddest sounds on earth, when young Scrooge and his girlfriend, riding along in a trap, lovers, sing a sweet duet called "Happiness." He peered into the memory with dim despair and it broke his heart. He saw Warholic sweating in his ludicrous red half-drapery. " Do this. Don't sue your ex-wife. She's the saddest person on earth. She has nothing. She owns nothing. Make that promise, and I will go with you."

"I don't know," said Varwick. "I don't know."

"I'll *talk* to you about it," said Warholic.

Eyestones pondered him.

"What? *What*?"

"Answer me."

"He's a Jew," said Discknickers. "Don't buy it."

"What if I promise to think about it?"

"Will you *promise?*"

"I will," said Warholic.

"All right."

"God bless us everyone!" sarcastically toasted Gnorm, raising his glass of bourbon.

"Let's get going then. I need to get out of here. I can't stand it. For Jews, Christmas is a mockery," said Warholic. "Lights? Dumb wreaths? Manger scenes like out of Barnsville? Three Kickers with beards on camels, an A-rab, a Schvartz, a Chinee, and all those horny shepherds in goatskins on the rocky hillside wagging their G-clefs? And the douceness of their eyes? Kneeling by the stage-lights? Badger humble? Golliwog-like in their innocence? O little town of Bethlehell lit up by a blue comet with a long holy tail? All big news for you godbotherers! Church rooks! Spoon-headed elders! Pinwheel-eyed evangelicals! All those dingbat Christian dispensationlists with big ears and sky-blue suits and square-heads!" He liltingly sang, "I came upon a midnight clear, fucking your bum, pawing your hair!" He leaned over to whisper, "If you really want to know the truth, Eyestones, since Hanukkah is a joke-holiday even to Hebrews, which is why all our songs are sad and all our wars are merry, we traditionally go out for Chinese food on that miserable day, or did you know that?" He cross-slapped his hands twice in the good-riddance way. "But forget that shit! I want to celebrate! I want some ginch! I want to grab some T & A at the Purple Cucumber and ogle strippers. I wanna see some lettuce! Like when that girl named Barola Frascati does that thing with her bullwhip? In those black leather boots? I tell you, boys become men! We're talking about giving a guy a pup-tent!"

"Bracelets!" said Spalatin.

"Nell Mezzo's my favorite!" sald Gnorm.

"I love sexy, salacious Flotilla! And lovely Charlotte North Carolina and Her Hatterasians!" said Mr. Fattomale.

"You forgetting Tomata du Plenty who juggles ninepins?" put in Mutrux.

"Or Wanda Pole," added Varwick, drooling. "Wanda Pole!"

"How about Revitalique with those gigantic bobbing snokes?" asked Warholic. Everyone's enthusiasm shouted loud. But the queen of them all, everyone agreed, hooting in unison, was Crayola De Blu. Warholic glugged the last of his beer, set down the can, and clapped his hairy hands. "Now who's for the raunch and the runway?"

L
Crayola De Blu

The Purple Cucumber, the dark strip bar, reeked of beer. Customers sat on stools around garishly lit walkways and in booths at the back. All the lightbulbs in the small club were flame-shaped. It was late, and the music, blaring from several speakers, raked the long room. Holiday lights, tear-shaped themselves, had been strung along the rim of the stage, as various strippers, mostly sexy young women, some older, took their turn dancing with various gimmicks: Flava du Jour, who came out naked and then provocatively began to dress, brassy Dona Ferentes with her bull-whip, Princess Dakota, Blondie 'N' Chaynes who could lace her shoes with her teeth, and even an old crumbling trot or two like homely Delia Faulconer and the hideous, overrouged retread named Kandy Kiss in a leather bra, whose fat hamster cheeks filled with air as she hopped about wheezing, doing inexplicable clown bounces, a total refrigerant to the roomful of disapproving men who hissed her away. "She has the eyes of a hen and the nose of an anteater," said Warholic, waving her off with dissatisfied cacks. "Talk about fucking Sasquatch! You know who I'm waiting for."

As it was Christmas Eve, a repertory of fifteen dancers had been assembled, each taking turns in sets of five minutes each. Grinning, sweating, Warholic poked Eyestones as pert Barola Frascati cavorted about sensuously disrobing, her scoping eyes drawn to a lusty squint as she calmly surveyed the ogling men. They watched Revitalique,

mooseish and misnamed Sexy Smuckler, and a pretty elvin sexpot named Bunny ("Paws") Hand all the way from Florida who worked with a white serpent. It was after them that tall, incandescently lovely Crayola De Blu stepped smokily through the wafting lilac arras. Everyone gasped. To the serpentine music of Saint-Saëns's "Bacchanale" from *Samson et Dalila* she moved like liquid to the center of the azure-lit stage as the thin ice-blue kimono she wore, diaphanous and long, slipped off in delicate degrees. She swung about her honeyed hair like a belt and, naked as a Bronzino Venus, softly moved to a center pole where with a kind of searching hunger she began just discernibly to hump, teasing, teasing, teasing, moving her hands in stroboscopic flutters, stepping backwards after each move in kicky colt steps, calculating the effect of her lewd, inviting motions in the desperate abyss of silence, of urgency, that she caused in all of her stunned and slack-jawed pursuivants. She slid her hands around her waist with slithering motions and fribbled each of her breasts the way a wine riddler turns a bottle of champagne first to the right and then to the left. An eerie purple glow came from the indirectly lit walls of the club, leather and vulgarly ribbed. The first thought of Eyestones was: *The goddess leading the silver goddesses from the dark.* It was then as if he went immediately deaf for something, Fate perhaps, whispered with hideous ice-cold effrontery into his ear, *Who but golden Helen sought all men?* A region within him suddenly died. He did not have to look twice at the sensuous stripper dancing before him. It was none other than Rapunzel Wisht.

She was so beautiful. Had she been dipped in jewel luster? Her skin under the hot lights was burnished like brushed aluminum, a hot, incandescent tone almost preternaturally shining with metallic radiance, although the blue lights, revolving about her with almost priapic urgency, somehow revealed the delicacy of her white skin. Her naked legs were long and of the palest white with light blue tributaries. A gleam of perspiration rose on her perfect back, and she looked ductile as gold that could be spun or drawn and yet still remain shimmering gold. The tension was palpable. Lust like a scarlet mist enveloped the room. A series of rotating multicolored filters fast-flashed her movements with pinwheel lighting along with the throbbing music. Undulating with swerving hips, Crayola De Blu swayed in front of the brass pole and as if basking in the borrowed glory of her stage-persona lewdly and repeatedly began kissing her pretty reflection with lapping tongue and crazy gleaming eyes, seducing her own image in an eu-

phoric *méconnaissance.*

She took her measured time delicately drawing a single expert finger back and forth across the elastic top of her panties, a mere wisp of a net. Her eyes were buffed blue and given butterfly-wings by mascara, and she seemed to watch with smiling insolence the helplessness of her captured slaves. She insinuated herself into a soft white chair, easing backwards, and dangled a pair of nylon stockings she had invitingly rolled and unrolled back and forth along her rising and falling pelvis. Punting off her shoes, she stared at the men as she took turns shaking out and pulling on a new pair of sheer blue nylon stockings up over her feet, past her ankles, and up to her thighs, teasingly extending her legs and pointing her toes into the air as delicately, slowly she attached the silk to the hooks of her black garters, swinging her legs wide, and then mouthing unidentifiable words as she stood up and began swaying, undulating, from one silent man to another—most smoldered, while several of the randy younger bucks dared to address her, albeit nervously, with exclamatory cries and kissing sounds—whereupon pushing her arms forward she raised her jiggling breasts as though offering them some kind of rare food. She twisted and stooped and spun and stopped abruptly to stare, one hand raised as if to elevate the adoration. She did a layback spin. Sinuously, slowly, delicately, inch by inch, she now slipped off her sex-blue chiffon transparent panties in the jewel light, glided toward the center pole, and with her hands began to caress it with lithe, configuring fingers. A yellow diamond toe-ring spurtled a thousand colors in the light.

"I can't believe it," gasped Warholic, his eyes popping open like Chinese paper umbrellas. "Look at those gabongas! What jehosaphats!" His strangulated voice was so thick with lust it sounded as if he were speaking through a mask. "*Bulbes, bulbes!*" he shouted and boiling over his fat effortfully reached way out trying to grab at her breasts. "*Patshn, Patshn, kichelech!*" he muttered, spitting. He rose over his stool, burning with urgency, his fat, distorted, yellow face almost a pure blank of sexual zombieism. He was nudging everyone around him, wrangling their opinions like a flak. "Look at that ass! Like crawfish—you suck the head and eat the tail! I can't believe this. Such a *tsatskeleh*! Screw Cat in the Hat and Cheesequake and Tomata! Did you see her come out of that fucking kimono? I thought I was gonna have an angina! Those creamy thighs, her hair, those full, hot buttocks, that straining. The way she . . . hey, what's the matter?"

The flame-shaped bulbs of the bar resembled the flames of hell. Or was it his tears shaping them? wondered Eyestones taking off his eyeglasses. His stomach convulsed, and he slowly bent over in aching pain.

The one woman was clearly the draw there, far more than any of the others in the naked array of shameless, desperately exhibitionistic, mostly beautiful if garish women who had taken their turns dancing on the runway. A sour-foul odor of multitudes of bats seemed to rise like aggressive fumes as the temperature in the club perceptibly rose. Ghostly arborizations of dark shadows hung over the walls as that shimmering purple light cast odd leaping shadows on the ribbed walls. Tears came to Eugene's eyes. Black witches in tattered dresses flew past his sight, which seemed now to be vibrating at irregular intervals with unearthly unevenness and a kind of upside-downness. What were those sounds? Diabolical voices hissed and swooted kissing noises. But his heart had gone and there sat only a crater. Meanwhile, Crayola De Blu had taken out a bottle of Perry Ellis perfume and was splashing it down her stomach and slathering its wetness around her flesh to loud moans. A high falling whine drilled behind Eyestones's eyes but even lowering his head into his trembling hands did not stop a black eye-ache. His heart was sinking, slowly sinking, his hopes like a tall tree dropping its leaves in a sudden cold solitude. He saw only fog but everyone gasped as Crayola De Blu swept up the airy cincture of her blue kimono and, displaying all of the unbridled passion of a young jungle queen as she performed a series of limbolike stamps sublimated into swelling waves that rippled snakelike down her pliant body, she suddenly dropped her hands, bending her head slowly backwards until it almost touched her backbone. Her stomach muscles stretched as she began teasing her crotch, masturbatory-wise, with the hot urgencies of the wisp of that cincture of blue. Managing to make eye-contact with each man, she deftly leaned forward and kissed a man's temple and then backed up. She began enticingly caressing herself with flickering fingers that licked up and down her flanks. Rolling then into a sudden split, she sat spread out there lapping her clavicle on both sides, wet her finger with repeated tonguing and sucking sounds, almost animal-dumb, and ran her long wet finger into that rising, falling, and rising indentation by her neck, that hot Sea of Tranquility, with a hunger that triggered a long, exhaustible groan like runaway lust through the gathering of men. She stood up and waggled all her fingers.

Then she disappeared.

The pinwheel lighting of the rotating multicolored filters sent theatrical colors in every direction. Smoke from cigarettes and cigars spread clouds through the room, swirling around a glass mirror-ball. The men all screamed as Crayola left the stage and applauded to have her return. In the meantime, a series of other strippers appeared in five-minute intervals: Venez M'Aides, Miss Stormy Weather, Jaklyn Dick, the Black Pearl, Pipi de Chat, Torpax the Explosive Gel, Windorah the Archwitch, Lariat, Elki from Norway, Venus Intermissa, Eheu Fugaces, and Ann Uit Coeptas. An all-gum trio appeared for a kissing contest with audience participation: Ms. Wriggly Gum ("She *giggles*! She *jiggles*! She *wriggles*!"); lewd Meg Farang from Thailand; and Ms. Plastika Elastica from Portugal. Warholic, who was bellowing for someone from *Quink* to go up on the stage and participate, was particularly flummoxed that Eyestones in God knows what kind of mood had said nothing but merely sat with lowered head rubbing his eyes, and so he decided to ignore him.

The audience soon hushed as sexy Crayola De Blu reappeared for another turn on stage. She stepped out now under a baby-spot in a very short flapper's dress with horizontal bands of dangling gold fringe, her eyes smoky dark with the delicate maroon/green/black—glaucous—of the leaf of a Chinese smoke tree. She vamped. She spread her legs. She shimmied the fringe, grabbed the pole, lilted back and forth, and, after completely stripping to complete nakedness except her garter-belt, nylons, and G-string, she lasciviously leaned forward toward a sea of shouting young men and middle-aged gropers to quiver her bare breasts, which swung like bell-tongues, whereupon in some kind of rodeo-mode she began to strut, ponylike, with obscene gestures, thrashing her hair this way and that, almost in a frenzy, while pulling out several other clips to let down even more of her hair. She crawled on all fours toward the center of the stage and wrapped her legs around the pole, slid up and down on it, did splits, gyrating with her mouth agape, a wet-lipped expression of questioning wonder and lewd innocence.

What folklore motif was this, which dark Propp? wondered Eyestones, coming apart, in the sudden grip of a near retinichoraiditic blackout. A dragon turning into some alluring object and seducing him? A preternatural gorgon opening her jaws from the sky to the earth? A sorceress who had broken into his soul? A witch attempting to

gnaw through a quivering tree in which some poor, deluded creature that he now saw was himself had taken refuge, or lost out on being weighed, or was vanquished because of a trust that had only been foolishness? He thought of Oisin when his foot touched mortal ground and all his years in the blinding of an eye descended with the weight of an avalanche on top of him.

Groups of men at the front began to bellow and shout with pawing gestures for Crayola De Blu to approach them. She strutted to the edge of the runway of the bar, provocatively rolling her midriff, lifting each of her breasts to lick each of them in turn, all the while doing double-takes, whence came a mad dash among her special devotees to stuff money into the space of every strap and sling and shoe-pit they could find. A thing that moves, realized Eyestones, acquires as much space as it loses. Her green eyes, wild and hot, threw off a furious discharge, a cross between anger, lust, and domination, not so much human eyes as strange embers burning like sparkling fires sprinkled with minerals and copper salts. She was now wet, perspiring, money-pinned, her long snow-white body writhing as if to invite the teasing linear streams of blue light playing about her, her silky once billowing hair now stuck in places in curious and disheveling knots. In her writhing desperation, her movements as she cavorted about seemed to become less sane, less rational, in the almost complete abandon of her blue body as if the tom-tom rhythms she heard were vibrating on it, animating it, plucking at it, and, making low, animal, menacing, provocative sounds like *Rawrr!* and *Sputt!* she appeared almost baffled in the gusts of the whirling, bewildered slavery of abandonment she showed that seemed almost convulsive. Eyestones, who was in the grip of a closed-eye vision, a grim hallucination of some sort, half black aura and half demonic afterglow, a vision of light dissolving and changing shape, was pressing his brow. Like Jacob, he tragically saw Leah's eyes when he had expected Rachel's — or, worse, saw the treachery of a once-lovely Rachel in the brutality of her eldest sister, Leah, made hideous by her crimes. Rapunzel's drenched hair was streaming like perspiration. Her eyes were lit with a violet fire. It was as if in a sense that as she whipped it with a kind of reckless helicopterian frenzy she was literally trying to fly. She improvised with beckoning, instructive gestures, long teasing fingers, squeezing her hands on her full breasts as if trying to draw all the ogling men without exception into the full fertility of herself, inviting all the worship, all the ecstasy, all the need of her

suppliants in the thunderous dark, most of them with their mouths gaping as if trying to feed on her supple, ringing nakedness, while others grolching and making loud eating noises snapped their big jaws like massive insatiable crocodiles insanely craving rampion. The stripper's intense face and furious green eyes, scarily drawing-in to what now seemed a long wedge-shaped head in her pursuing concentration, revealed something now of the monstrous about it as a violent, almost orgasmic trembling seized her body, its nimbleness, its lightning, its searching incessant expense. She squatted and rose. She was hissing and snarling, and waving in the air with extended claws, making a quick survey in her triumph of everything around her, as if for a moment to single out and to look at Eugene and mouth "No"—or had this been an illusion?—and sneer at him for his foolish and foregone faith. There was no competition anywhere. She whirled, pointing everywhere, and abruptly was gone. *O, how much more doth beauty beauteous seem*, Shakespeare said to Eyestones, *by that sweet ornament which truth doth give.* Truth? *Truth?* The truth is a lie! thought Eyestones. A lie! The rose looks fair, but canker-blooms have full as deep a dye!

When he recalled as if by some stage-wizard's trickery that Rapunzel's smile always had a way of lingering two beats too long after she looked at him, while recollecting at the same time how with Laura Warholic, repeatedly, appearance and expectation were constantly corrected by reality and actuality, he realized with rue how vain and self-absorbed he had been all along for not seeing with both of them a lack of evidence on the subject as being the evidence itself. It was so true. The fingers rubbing out have written truth.

Tearfully, Eugene lowered his head. He had been looking up but saw nothing. A vertigo overtook him, a strange disorientation akin to the phenomenon of staring at one's name for too long and suddenly not recognizing the letters in it as part of any alphabet one had ever learned. Opening his eyes, he saw that they were closed. He covered his ghost face and decried not a calonyction moonflower but a gathering malice of full planets swirling like mad through his weak fingers and through his heated eyelids bursting inside his head in a whorl of asterisklike phosphenes swirling and jumping in a spate of insane colors. Orion, tall as creation, now no longer crossed the sky with strides light-years long but disappeared, went black, redacted, dragging into itself like an abandoned hole anything and all that ever was. It was a moment in its terrifying dimension like an impossible hum. It seemed

metallic at first, then winding. Then he felt complete silence. Noiselessness. He looked at his dark hands and nothing was there. When he looked up in one moment of disbelieving misattention he was unable to see. An impenetrable dark-grey mist hung there like curtains he could not feel. Heat flooded him as he went rigid, stood up, and cried, "*I'm blind*!"

A sudden seasick knowledge of being a fool, a vain and presumptuous coward, highlighting in a lustful whinnying shriek from somewhere that mocked him for his blindness, overcame him, and his deluded, misbegotten worship of Rapunzel, of her indefectability, was not, in fact, a pathetic lie forged against truth, but rather the result, he saw in his sad, inarticulate way, of his own priggish vanity, monstrous pride, and golden-calf worship. The painter Van Gogh had put it well. "Just as we take a train to go to a city," he said, "we take death to go to a star." For death was suddenly what Eyestones badly yearned for. It was true: the longer we live, the more we realize we deserve to die. The subtle lures, deceits and allurements that had masked the charnel-house within were borne in on him with the hollow resound of undisguised mercilessness. Presumption! Presumption! His great parade drum of a heart burst with arrowlike pain. His body sagged like a puppet with no hand inside. He took off his eyeglasses, his heavy bifocals, and lowered his head as if shot. He saw nothing. He did not see her anymore. She was erased. And he entered another dimension of pain. *O God, bless me through the evils of this day. Help me see my way clear or I cannot keep the cart on wheels*. Ring the bell. Close the book. Put out the candle. *Excommunicatio sit.*

Ache penetrated his head. It hurt worse than but seemed part of the retinal pain that had so immobilized him with his hand braced between sandbags in the stews of Biên Hoa, when he felt from sheer agony he was descending the slope. Was it not Landor's *Pericles and Aspasia*, thought Eyestones, his sore head spinning, revolving, that said, "There is no breath of passionate love repeated of which the echo is not faint at last"?

A lap dancer, shoggling her buttocks, bent forward into the pull of Warholic's wide, appropriating grin and got his permission, by way of a twenty-dollar bill, to grind herself backwards in concentric circles between his spread legs for several minutes. With raw saturnalian shouts, he hawed and hooed until she got up and left. Wiping his face with a hanky, he sniggered, "Gotta tell ya. I'm a tough embarrass." Suddenly

there were two of Eyestones; one whispered: *Go*. And the other stood up and walked out into the blackness of the upside-down night. Disappointment had taken jurisdiction over his mind, like an immemorial shade. Monstrous bubbles. Emphases of nothing. The absurdity of living. A greyness filled his being. It was despair that drew him down, heavily down in a thick miasma in his stomach, a fog that, never dissipating, weighed darkly in him, a brooding mist that killed his interest in any and all things and in consequence made virtually every human act of his a dying chore. Where was he going? Where was he now? Come Ananias, he pleaded, restore my sight!

Eyestones was sitting alone on a bench as the tears spilling through his fingers that he had lifted to stare at a row of consumptive trees told him he could see again. How he got there he did not know. And where was he? His stomach felt dug out, a chasm of emptiness. Truth he realized could not be organized without invalidating it. He wondered how much of that heavy emotion of unbearable pain in personal grief was true sorrow? How much indulgence in remorse, self-incrimination? He was frozen in a self he could not in its awful lightness easily identify, as if his essence preceded his existence, to reverse Sartre's axiom. He gasped, he wept with the terrible realization that the constellation of Orion, where stars are born, commands the northern winter sky and is as distant and as inexplicable and as cold as the deepest and furthest beyonds. Ratnaster was right, he thought. Weather is torture. Nature is an executioner. Where love is missing, there is no God. The world is as desolate as was the once-famous city of Jezreel, long since destroyed, buried and forgotten, reduced to nothing but a mound of powder, a silt the silent centuries softly blew away. No, he thought, everlastingness is only the experience of sterile darkness. It is true. And it is sadly significant. Nebula also means mist or cloud. Was not his scorn of Laura his sin with Rapunzel? What was beauty for? A way for the unbeautiful to feel they do not exist, for the beautiful to feel they do? Was a beauty an exaggeration of what we worship? A symmetry we subjectively insist on? Was to seek beauty to seek meaning or court emptiness? What is revealed of our own hollowness when, while part of what we perceive comes through the senses as we look at something, another part—and William James said the larger part—comes from our own mind?

He found himself instantly deprived and lost, a hollow man, aware only of his total deadlock, a dead and terrible coldness, a barbed sense of failure. God pity a one-dream man, he thought, who believes in the

one thing necessary. Every virtue has seven vices, he thought. Death is not an event in life—Wittgenstein was right, Eyestones realized—it is not lived through, not even experienced, as such, but rather a wholly and distinct blackness of its own devising, preventing in its terrible mystery anything like sane comprehension.

He saw he had been wrong in the worst way. Truth must have clothes, he saw, cynically reversing a once-held belief—it is craft that prefers to go naked. Drained of instincts, he could now comprehend with the fire of hot horror just by looking at himself the Bard's warning that lust in action is the expense of spirit in a waste of shame. He thought of Gloucester in *King Lear*: "Get thee glass eyes; / And, like a scurvy politician, seem to see the things thou dost not." In an overwhelming epiphany, he suddenly understood that he knew, by what he desired, what he did not know. It is true: our tragedy is as much our paltriness as our pride. Who dares speak of certitude? In the final analysis, we poor underlings in the mist do not even have the *knowledge* of precisely how we fail God.

LI
Saint Pretzel

Christmas music on Boylston Street was playing from every shop and storefront. It was cold and flaughts of snow drifting through the air sparkled in front of the blazing streetlights. Eugene Eyestones, broken with despair, mute with sorrow, stumble-stepping without feeling the streets, walked along the sidewalks absently staring into the decorated windows. He wept quietly and under his chin folded his hands into a cat's cradle and prayed to Saint Pretzel. Almost unconscious, half-blind in the thick virga of swirling flakes, like fabric flocking, he walked aimlessly through the Public Garden, crossed the street by the Edward Everett statue, and headed into the white frozen pathway of the Common. It was as if looking from overhead he saw himself a stranger walking along.

> I saw Eugene go down the street.
> Goodbye and my lover, goodbye!
> Both his shoes were filled with feet,
> Empty in the heart and of eye.

Limbs of ice with precarious reflections in them like flame clicked against each other in the frosted trees, where several crows sounding *prruks* and *ccr-ruks* reminded him of Ratnaster's gruesome parable on birds of prey. He looked through the bare branches of the crêpe myr-

tles icy black above the snow-white walks and high drifts. The overhanging elms were darker and more gnarled than he had every seen them, and the snow piling into the crotches of the arched branches did nothing in spite of the season to soften what seemed their menacing reach. It eventuated strangely that just as he needed help he looked and saw Duxbak sitting on a bench, all by himself.

Duxbak was smiling at nothing.

"I was on my way over to Arch Street but decided to pause in this fairyland to take a gulp of beauty," said Duxbak. It was a Franciscan shrine, where he often went to sit in a back pew, feeling warm in the sacramental silence of God among the poor and penitent. "I feel part of the team now," he said, making room on the bench for his friend. "I recently became an unvowed, lay auxiliary Carmelite tertiary." He smiled. "I thought I'd sit here and watch the night. The light of the snow has redeemed it." He sat with his tiny feet in bump-toed shoes, planted side by side. "We are all tall candles, bright, in the midst of tallow."

A cold breeze blew out of the darkness. Eyestones sat down, feeling the wet snow melt down his neck in ripples as he stared into the pulseless slackness of the winter dark. How tragic was love, he saw. *She meant one thing to me—everything*, he concluded. What a sad commentary on oneself, to experience in the loss of one thing what ultimately refutes the meaning of life. Was not Proust right when he wrote, "The woman loved is but an artificial creature, whom the man gradually forces the real woman to resemble"? The heavy snow muffled auto horns, even the growl of snowplows raking the drifted streets and the metronome clank of loose tire-chains in the slow traffic. Iron bells from Arlington Street Church sounded and from some corner across the street a Salvation Army soldier shook his tinkling bells. Eyestones haltingly explained where he had been and what had happened and why, to which Duxbak, nodding, responded as gently as Iapyx tending the wounds of Aeneas when he was struck by an arrow. It was not a humiliation only because of his friend's charity. And they had often talked. Duxbak knew Eugene well enough to believe in him, especially when it came to any office-related follies.

"I made a mistake," Eugene confessed. "I think falling in love is ultimately only the act of daring to love, of yearning for it, of wanting to feel it." It occurred to him now, as it had many times, however, that there is a psychological law that drives a person who acts under pres-

sure to supply in his imagination a whole series of retrospective reflections to prove his freedom to himself. Didn't Plato classify *eros* as a demonic force that, while it can lift the soul into divine spheres, is equally capable of delivering it into a life of utter baseness, suffering, and loss in which others are made to suffer, as well? Regarding the shadows of angels, why shouldn't they be as dark and menacing and as haunted as a human's? Eugene recalled that Onegin had to see Tatiana again in another context in order to fall in love; why shouldn't it follow that he see someone again to fall out of love?

Went what went? he asked himself, and came what came? Was what was? The plain words *leave* and *love* are actually cognate: how significant—the greatest mystery of love in crisis, Hamletic in the simplicity of obvious choice, is simply whether to love or whether to leave. Eugene wished for a shot of medroxyprogesterone acetate, which reduces or eliminates sex drive and sexual fantasy.

"A cage went in search of a bird," said Duxbak, quoting Kafka.

"She was small," Eyestones reflected. "I shouldn't be so surprised. Not all dinosaurs were huge. Some were as small as crows and rabbits. Did you know that?"

Duxbak, who had a predilection for honesty as well as for bow ties, adjusted his tie and said he did not. There he was, the most open-handed, whole-souled generous and liberal of men, precise of speech, always gentle, with a wistful smile. To see his faith was to be given faith. With a face barn-owl round, with asymmetrical lines, he nodded and his Harold Lloyd spectacles with cracked lenses shone in the night. He had indoor shoulders. A circumspect man who kept birdseed in his pocket to dispense and wore a dark suit to breakfast and always sat like a furled umbrella and never failed to butter his toast to the edges, he took Eyestones by the tip of his knee. "Saint Peter was a small man. So were all the Apostles. There is a smallness in all of us. Take me," he said. "I'm small. I am nobody. Nobody at all. I'm sure I look like an owl." He laughed. "I'm told that the round eyes of an owl act as a parabola to collect sound—to maximize surface areas, like satellite dishes."

He was an enthusiast in that he expected and found more evident results from the grace of God than others seemed to find. He had seed-faith. He loved what wonderful effects true belief had in transforming man's entire life and outlook, keeping forever before his eyes a picture of the early Church and how with a lyrical and cloistral be-

neficence it had in the simplest way visibly penetrated and offered for one and all a ceremonious continuum to the waiting world. Nothing less would serve him for a model. If traditional doctrine holds that grace perfects nature, elevates it to a higher pitch, but leaves it nature still, he felt—never faithfully failed to believe—that grace and nature always worked hand in hand. David, he felt, must not wear the panoply of Saul. Man saved becomes fully man. Duxbak claimed another citizenship and owned another allegiance. Eugene turned. He heard bells coming from the church, full-throated and ringing loudly with an unearthly and penetrating sweetness all up and down the scale until settling at last on a familiar hymn.

> Joy to the world! The Lord is come;
> Let earth receive her King:
> Let every heart prepare Him room
> And heav'n and nature sing.

People carrying wrapped packages tottered along. Snow powdered stingy walkways that alone remained bare like a grey trail. He heard a horse and carriage and sleigh-bells. Children all bundled up in fat parkas and woolen jackets made gleeful sounds as they trundled along through the snow along Boylston Street.

"I feel alone," said Eugene.

"Solitude may be the opposite of isolation," replied Duxbak, pulling his own coat about him, "and yet how one leaks into another! Maybe their spouts are connected. Nothing is not only nothing. It is also our prison, Eugene. To be free is to be alone, to be alone is to be imprisoned, to be imprisoned is not to be free, no?" He was silent for the longest time. Then he turned, adjusted his coat, and took his friend's hands. "Who does not grieve, hardly exists." He whispered, "The voice of the Lord twists the oaks. He strips the forest bare. He thunders." The words, the phrases, coming in gasps and sobs almost, sounded to Eugene as if lyrics cast in the 3/2 *qinah* meter of Scripture, the mournful cadence of those experiencing sorrow. "He breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon, He shakes the desert."

Eugene's eyes ached. How little we see of what affects our very lives, he thought. The ox has a much bigger eye than the bird, but while the ox with its great eye sees only that part of the ground where it is feeding, the bird with its little eye can not only mount to the sky

and view all the glories of the heavens but be aware, be aware!

"You're right, Duxbak."

"It is more worthwhile to grieve over Rapunzel's absence than over her, to ask yourself why one thing repudiates a world. Forgive her, and be free."

Yes, thought Eyestones, that is what goodness is, to forgive those who have wronged us in the same prayer and by the same lights by which we ask forgiveness for ourselves. There was no other good, was there?

Snow like glitterdust swirled and rose into a fairy light that, sparkling, pluming in enchanting sprits, clogged tree forks and fingers and showed everywhere a lightfield. Was beauty in its sudden shifts, he wondered, only a mirage? Motion a magic of mirrors? Rapunzel, only by dint of a minute or a moment, *not* Laura, the failure, the knulp, the cheese that stands alone at the end of the children's game? Loving, we do not examine love any more than when, pitying, we choose out of vanity to determine our own riddling self-righteousness. Let it be, he thought. If Beauty was not Truth, let Truth be Beauty.

"A few years back I had no income at all and the car I had, living where I was, broke down," said Duxbak. "As my mother's 1960 Chevrolet was sitting idle in her garage—she was eighty-seven at the time and could not drive—she suggested that I borrow it until I got the money to get the brakes fixed on my own car, which in fact was an even older model. So I accepted her thoughtful offer. In due course, a phrase I do not fully comprehend but like the sound of, my older brother, a wealthy lawyer, owner of three or four houses and just as many if not more cars, several of which in the garage of his summer home, a Jeep and Cadillac, remain to this day chained together in case an intruder—or relative—tried to steal them, on a rare visit to see my mother, coincident as always with more important business that he had to do elsewhere in the region, upon learning that I was in possession of our mother's old car, invoking the immutable laws by which he had always lived and worked, invidiously decided that, under whatever circumstances and no matter how briefly, he did not want me to have her car. I think it was much worse than sibling rivalry. Success is not enough, you see, others must fail. In any case, within ten minutes of finding out I had it, my brother came over to my house and drove it back to her garage where it sits to this day, on flat tires, with a dead battery, rusting away. What is so awful is that depriving me of the car

mattered to him more than my driving it. He must have hated himself in doing so, but he has a small soul. Spirituality, true religion, if it is real, is *only* about helping someone, and nothing else! The parable of the Good Samaritan subsumes the entire Gospel: a priest rides by the fallen man but his enemy helps him? Christ's good news means that and only that alone. No amount of fumbling beads or bobbing in front of walls or spinning prayer wheels matters when that is absent. The entire Gospel message distills in the story of the Good Samaritan. A man needs to forgive."

It was true, thought Eyestones.

What he needed to forgive in Rapunzel Wisht for what merciless and judgmental thoughts he had of her, he saw he first had to forgive in Laura Warholic. It was all of it a question of extremism in both instances. With his bad eyesight, he had no perspective. Was it not a matter of telescoping? Had not he blundered by looking at Laura far too closely, just as he had looked at Rapunzel from far too great a distance? Would not his attempt at solving both riddles have been avoided in a state of proper balance? Or was love itself the disequilibriating riddle? What was it that Saint Augustine said, "Two loves have built two cities"? Now all of it seemed secondary. Sadly, he saw that it was something he had avoided with Laura all along. *Scordatura*, he thought. How can one understand what one refuses to? Jesus, facing the needy, had a need of his own; he needed first to have their faith in order to perform the miracle, not the reverse. Eugene wanted to seek forgiveness, thinking,

> No more let sins and sorrows grow,
> Nor thorns infest the ground;
> He comes to make His blessings. . . .

"I have been unfair."

"To Rapunzel?"

Eugene, who felt that he was straddling multiple realities, turned earnestly to his friend, almost pleading with the need to explain, shook his head.

"No, to Laura," he said. "I exploited her. In a hideous chiasmus all of my own making I acted toward Laura the very same way Rapunzel acted toward me, except that I see I had more guile. I used her for writing my columns. In rejecting her for no matter what valid reasons,

I lost the opportunity in a very real way to deserve what eventually I came to desire in another. She embodied by default much of what I wanted to write about. I see it now. I remade her on the page, tooled her for my use, tailored her, cut wafers out of the killed steel of her being as if segments of her heart. I also think it bothered me that when I did help her, it was to Warholic's satisfaction, who was saved the obligation in the very act. When you water the plant, as the old proverb goes, the pot drinks, too." If I used Laura, he thought, I abused her. Again he recalled ghostly Paganini and the use of strings deliberately mistuned. Didn't *scordatura* facilitate certain kinds of writing and give the solo instrument—like the ego—added brilliance? But what about Laura. What had he taken from her?

"She spent Thanksgiving with you, no?"

Eugene nodded.

"When did you last see her?"

"Twilight," came the reply. "When pumas hunt."

Duxbak removed his spectacles, breathed on the glass, and held them in his hand.

"I exploited her." Eugene squeezed his hands. Was he with his bad eyes and long black cloak like mad Paganini, that poor Genoese who played the devil's violin and had been jailed for murdering his mistress in a fit of jealous rage?" Laura was a hemisphere to me, a guise, almost a piano in the employ. I watched her, listened to her—she had so little to say—but the loss-element in her, the unintentionality, was eloquent, and, God forgive me, I did, I used her to write my columns, sorting through her trials and tribulations for my ideas and working them to my own advantage just like some malevolent Rumplestiltskin spinning straw into gold. A knee has a kind of face. So does the palm of the hand, the elbow and the ear. Extenuate. Accommodate. Interpret. And she will accompany you, except that she won't." He shook his head sadly and then looked up through the snowflakes into the black dome of the sky. He saw that what he had realized was true. "I don't know. I guess when one does not love the impossible, one does not love anything."

"It's true, Eugene. And I mean, if we don't believe the unbelievable, what would happen to faith?"

"That's good. And kind of you, dear man." He hugged him. "Is that Corinthians? Romans? Saint Paul?"

Duxbak shook his head. "No," he said, smiling. "Jennifer Jones in

Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing."

The snow was falling. Against the white world the streetlights took on a blue steady glow. As he breathed the cold air, sat there with his friend in the dark velvet darkness filling with snow, Eyestones with a raw glare into himself saw Laura Warholic, sentimentally, virtually a blind flower-girl, La Violetera, rather than what she was, a lonely, desperate wokan on edge and in the grip of terrible paraphilia. He had tried everything with her: formality, familiarity; compliments, coldness; sincerity, silence. Had he tried love? It was painful to call to mind her skinny desperateness, that long red nose pointing out like a weathervane. But there was one memory. One memory alone. One memory of her stood out on the distant horizon like Mars at perihelion: her weeping in the cinema, when watching the film *Scrooge*, over the musical number "Happiness."

Tears came to his own eyes as he thought of it.

"I don't know what to do," said Eugene, throat constricted.

Duxbak, standing up, began to pace about. He walked with his usual zonked, unnatural gait, arms stiff by his sides, and with that odd hip-doofus haircut that always made him seem loosely tethered to reality he looked like a funny futuroidal. The blowing snow swirled around him and made the landscape unreal. He proceeded up and down, back and forth. He who had known about Eyestones's love for Rapunzel was disheartened to hear what his friend told him and to see how it so badly affected him.

"I had to hate her," confided Eugene, "because trying to love her as I did—and I tried—I could not survive."

"From all you've told me, Eyestones, Warholic's ex-wife was more complicated than Warholic, no? And Lord knows our leader can be difficult."

"As in demented, yes."

"Still, I suppose we should give him credit for having come up with an idea for creating a magazine for people to follow their dreams."

"Paradoxical," said Eyestones.

"Because?"

"Aren't most people's dreams, who met him, never to see Warholic again?"

Duxbak paused. "Still—"

"I know, I know," nodded Eyestones.

They both said together, "Worse things happen at sea," and cor-

dially laughed.

> He rules the world with truth and grace
> And makes the nations prove
> The glories of His righteousness,
> And wonders of His love.

"Christmas," said Duxbak, listening.

"It's a beautiful time. Advent. And yet, people forget, it's a penitential season."

"Lights. Music. A nightingale has more notes in it than Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto," said Duxbak, holding up a small hand up to catch a light drifting snowflake. His rimless glasses, sparkling with lucifects from the lights of the street, reflected a gentle incandescence that seemed to hale from his own sweet inner spirit. "Will you listen to me? Now why the deuce did I tell you that? Let me answer by asking you to feel how the world, if one can only listen, has a lyric of truth in it everywhere. Everywhere!" Diderot was correct, thought Eugene. Good men are capable of a degree of enthusiasm that is unknown to the wicked. And didn't the Bible say he that is slow to anger is greater than he that taketh a city? It did. Eugene said earnestly, "I finally figured it out. It's true: *you're* Saint Pretzel!" Duxbak laughed with embarrassment and, pushing him away, began rummaging into one and then another of the pockets in his old oversized loden coat to find something.

"Here, take this."

"What is it?"

"It's a scapula," said Duxbak, pressing it warmly into Eugene's hand. "It will protect you." He smiled. "Remember we are told in the Gospels that a grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die."

"Otherwise it remains alone."

Duxbak took his friend's arm. "'But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit.'"

"I love paradox."

"Then you love life."

It seemed at that moment the earth sweetened in a moment of grace, of revolutionary beauty that, with beating wings, soared out of a black existential sky like white salvation and hovered over him in protection. To see, to see, to see, to see! thought Eyestones. Large flakes

swirled around them both in a kind of benediction. A hang-glider, he realized, can only ascend if it finds rising air, a thermal. Seek wakefulness instead of sleep, the Psalmist has said. If you are rebuked, take war out of your heart. The voice of the Lord divides the flames of fire. The day is yours, the night is also yours. Look for the peace that is found in affliction and not in the comfort of consolation. "Be kind to her," Duxbak whispered. "Go ask her forgiveness. Isn't it written that what you do to the least of God's brethren, you do to Him? Ask her to forgive you. Real love, beyond anything else, is sympathy. Go to her to absolve your own aching heart and in doing so bless hers." He paused a moment. "There is logic even to paradox, my friend. 'We also rejoice in our sufferings because suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character; and character, hope.' Romans 5:3. The only way to make meaning out of the suffering of others is to assume responsibility for it. Forgive."

Came a long pause.

"Laura," asked Eugene. "Or Rapunzel?"

"Both." He paused. "Each." He paused. "All."

He nodded.

"Mostly—"

Eugene looked up.

"Whoever needs it most."

Surely me, thought Eyestones.

Duxbak reached up and passionately hugged his friend Eugene Eyestones, embraced him for the longest time there in the close darkness of the Common under the depthless night sky, under the spokes of the witching trees, under the snow, under the opportunities of that Christmas night so cold and so mysterious, under the memories of the past, under the considerable invisible graces he knew were there, and then without a sound he folded his old coat tighter and tottled off into the inscrutable night.

LII
Christmas Alone

Eugene got home on Christmas Eve and sat for hours in the ghostly dark. His eyes ached, swollen, puffed with the memory of tears. He had taken out his black cellulose goggles and put them on to relieve his headache grown black from a love created and destroyed in one night like Jonah's gourd. What a vain, hopeless thing, he realized, to follow borrowed dreams, seeking to transform ourselves by feigning to own what we only rent and so find, as prey to our own temptations, merely the inversion of our ideals, taking from love, only loss; from hope, disappointment; from esteem, ridicule; from immortality, only dusty death. It was more feckless than quilling paper. We are at odds with our very selves, becoming nothing but what we are not and thus having to despair of being what we are. What we hope to find divulged is only what we see unmasked, with mystery the sole identity we ever come to know. The only surprise has no occasion. And what a species of sentimentality it is to think that the end of something tells the truth about it. He felt laboriously like a piece of clockwork running down and called over his cat Nook to pat him. Its meow, he thought, is the only noise that makes a sound that gently sings that gently sounds. He felt an ache of vacancy in his heart. How strange it was. It was the kind of emptiness in which absolute clarity of thought is possible. He got up, took off his "Chinese glasses," picked up a pen and wrote a poem. It went as follows:

O lessen, Christ, the dunnage on my heart.
I am not fit to handle batterns and boards,

planking of such greased and terrifying lengths
their noise when falling enters me like swords,

but far worse is the weight as heavy as my sins
stacked high on me like piles of wood in cords.

You who had to bear the wood our wickedness
heaped upon You, help me bear my own, my Lord,

suffering, but not like you so cruelly raised
upon that cross, nailed and pierced and gored.

Please ease my pain that I may say my prayers
this frozen night and not find hollow words?

He stood up, stumbled to the window, pulled the shades, shut off all the lights, sat on the side of his bed, took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and, putting his face into the side of his cat, uncontrollably wept into its fur.

LIII
Dimes on His Eyes

The holy day dawned bright with snow, piled high in drifts. Eyestones fed his cat and set out in the cold hoping to see Laura Warholic and give her the gift he had bought for her. He had dreamt, inexplicably, of Jonah in a fitful night's sleep and how truly weak, envious, small, and scheming that peculiar man's reasons for refusing to go to Nineveh had been. He recalled that the recalcitrant Jonah refused to preach not because he hated or feared the people of that wicked city, but because, selfishly, he simply did not want to share—how Disck-nickers would love it!—either his god or his covenant with them. Instead, he fled to the city of Tarshish, literally to the furthest remove possible, the distant end of the Sea of Philistines as the Mediterranean was then denominated. It was only after Jonah was peremptorily flung overboard and swallowed by a great fish that he sorely repented and then prophesied—the shortest sermon on record—"Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown." What happens then? Everybody repents: cavalry, cats, and kings. It was the message that this Christmas Day gave to Eyestones, speaking to his heart in a way that seemed suddenly clear, a homily almost as if personally sent to him. Had he not arrogated a domain that belonged to God, punitively receiving from Rapunzel what for so long he had given to Laura? He wanted to ask her forgiveness and in doing so redeem himself. He could think only of his own sins perpetrated by judging hers. Why else should the last

be first? The urge to punish a crime, more often than not, is connected to the urge to commit it.

The night had been endless. "Mornings, I love them so much," he recalled reading Tennessee Williams often said, celebrating the "triumph over night."

He went into Boston in order to go to church at the Arch Street Shrine, carrying in his pocket as a gift for Laura the silver necklace with the silver perfume bottle he had had made in Mexico for her. He had boxed and wrapped it. There was a Mass being celebrated at the front altar, and the pews were crowded, so quietly he lit a vigil light for his intentions, knelt there and although hearing in his mind the echoes of Warholic's blasphemies ("The Cross is the most hideous image on this earth!") and Ratnaster's bat-black harangues against the clergy along with the lines of an ecstatic poem of a ninth-century nun,

> Jesukin, my Jesukin,
> Lodges in my poor cell within.
> What's the worth of prelates?
> All is lie but Jesukin . . .

nevertheless made his prayer.

Eugene realized that Laura would be receiving Warholic's legal threat on Christmas Day, just as her former husband had threatened, a man who in his unforgiving fury hated her with the kind of weather that pulls down oaks. He reflected that he had not in fact seen her since Thanksgiving. Unintentionally, he had missed Laura's birthday a week or so before. As she was never at home, however, he could only wish her happiness on her answering machine, where in the outgoing message with a hysterical rock recording in the background she always mentioned her name so hesitantly it was as if she had just gotten used to the sound of it. Eyestones wanted her to have the necklace. It was her birthday present. He rejoiced to remember that Aristotle's definition of love is to will the good of another. He would take war out of his heart and accept the night if that was his due. He wanted to hand her the gift personally, simply because, whether she knew it or not, he had been having it made for her, ironically, at the very time that she falsely believed—as she did and would ever afterward—that he was having an affair with some woman in Cuernevaca. Like a wild prophet, Harriet Trombone had warned him that same day by way of admonition,

alluding to her Bajan ability to see and to know things, citing a transcendent gift to be able to smell out evil, not to go see her.

As to Laura's main Christmas present? Eyestones was wearing it. It was the surprise of the black leather jacket with the Craven Slucks's name inscribed on it and an Indian chief's war-bonnet on the left arm.

Before taking the train to Cambridge and after hours of walking along the river he stopped to buy for Laura a small bunch of marigolds at an open flower stall in Boston. He waited in the windy, ice-cold Downtown Crossing station for what seemed forever—holiday schedule—and then boarded the T, rode to Central Square, and got off. It was getting on in the afternoon. He smelled the marigolds. *Not* Marilyn's anthuriums! After Laura rebuked him for his floral tribute in New York to an actress she disliked, that would be a mistake. Golden marigolds. Orange marigolds. David Burpee's favorite flower. *Cempasuchil.* Mexico. Day of the Dead. Strung around statues. Chosen for their strong aroma to attract the souls and draw them to the offering prepared in their honor. It felt good to feel their color.

He recalled one of the last times he saw Laura, when they had sat on a brick wall at the rim of City Hall Plaza. He had bought two cups of clam chowder. It is a square that in its pitiable desolation, disconnected and empty as the moon, imparts a feeling of immediate unrest and a sense of everyone having gone away. An absurd city hall rising up there of grey concrete is circumscribed by a vast circle so devoid of welcome it wars against, diminishes—virtually *refuses*—any gathering of humans. There are no benches, terraces, or trees in its austere brutality and illogical disaggregation. The overhead sky itself seemed to face away as if daunted by the undermining waste and pointless vastness in the acreage of this incoherent block masquerading as firmament. Nothing in the arid expanse gave a sign of life. Laura had suspiciously smelled the ingredients in the cup and poked indifferently into it with a plastic spoon. She had tried dissembling before him with almost virtuoso goofiness. Why then was there dread in her eyes? Glum havoc? He remembered thinking: *The last leaves of autumn dance as they fall.* A few twists of the amatory kaleidoscope on her part to try to make him jealous he refused to hear and merely put it down to excusive strategy.

Central Square—"Malfunction Junction"—was fairly deserted when he came up to the street. Snowdrifts were machined hard up against stores and shops, most of which were closed for the day. Tar-

get. The Food Crypt. The Stone and Cone. There was the dark Hotel Thirteen looking like an empty shell. And Lung's, whose *Busses Welcome* sign looked as sad and stupid as usual. A group of saucy young black guys with devil's haircuts and flashing sex-you-up grins still hung around the T station, draped in front of it, jiggling change in their pockets and rubbernecking at passers-by.

He walked down Western Avenue.

Laura was not home. Using his hands as blinders, Eugene peered into the downstairs foyer. The grey building looked empty as a cenotaph, sepulchral and old. He saw her old bicycle leaning against a wall inside. Maybe she had gone to Syracuse to visit her grandmother for the holidays after all. He slipped the golden flowers into his jacket, walked down to the Charles, and meandered up and down along the riverbank for more than an hour. A single black crow high up on a sycamore branch, fixing Eyestones below with one bright eye, cocked his small head and said, "*Trreech.*" He kept walking in the cold. He was seeking nothing for himself. He recalled some lines that Jack Kerouac, writing in *The Dharma Bums*, had quoted from one of the Indian sutras: "Practice charity without holding in mind any conceptions about charity, for charity is after all just a word." Fuke, the Chinese sage of the ninth century who wandered around China constantly ringing his bell as a call for blessings, he was not. He simply wanted to forgive and be forgiven for having prized the soul in a kind of witless altruism higher than the reality of what the soul should do, should feel, should care for, should forgive. The blue of love over the red of law! Forget image-mania. He yearned only for inclusion. Both/and replacing either/or. How words refer only to themselves and not to the reality they claim to describe! He wanted no *name* put on anything. Not charity. Not kindness. Not caring. Not solicitude. Nothing. He thought with humiliation and self-mockery of his condescending and sententious attitude toward Laura Warholic and his words of forgiveness, when he had smugly proclaimed to her that love was sacrifice, self-righteously explaining for her by way of righteous rule and the thump of law and the intermediary of concept that true lovers want to forgive, welcome the chance to overlook faults, virtually seek the opposition in order to prove their love. Although it was true, it was nevertheless dogma. He wanted to tell her that. If there was going to be any opposition, he would simply drop off her presents and leave. He stopped a moment to listen. He was pleased to hear Christmas music somewhere.

It was borne of Christmas goodness, not the ploy of giving to take. Desire can imply lack, he thought. If it be the case that there is no adoration utterly free from desire, there is no reason why the two should be identified. What are realities worth compared to the mirages we would know? And who could step forward to deny them false? Some logically positivistic Herodian with forks for fingers? He once believed that to penetrate the real questions of life in its immediacy, to solve its mysteries, one had to scrutinize its estranged and marginal forms. Now he saw the vanity that was his in thinking of himself above anyone or anything. He would be a mage, following the star in the East! Shall the true lover be satisfied to comprehend his intoxication only by sensation? Should the rapture of one's love be limited only to earth? No, never, not once. It was so clear to him. He could see that now in spite of, because of, Rapunzel. Attachment may get in the way of ultimate perception. It was incontrovertibly true. The map is not the territory.

No prize should ever be awarded in a true contest, he thought, for pure competition is always overshadowed, sullied, by mere striving for a mere bauble. "The half is fuller than the whole," wrote Hesiod. To have none is closer to having all than having one. As all love that attaches itself to a person must be impermanent, was not failure inherent? Is not all love connected to enduring worth attached to the Absolute, to the idea of God? Or was Saint Augustine lying? Was it a mistake to believe that love was strongest in the *absence* of a loved one, a position needing separation, a certain distance, to preserve it? He stopped and again as in the Common and with his faraway eyes looked high into the faraway fullness of the sky, high up way past the face of Orion's silver shimmering beauty. Complete genius is an ideal. No man or woman is absolutely without the quality, and yet no one possesses it completely. Was it possible that he had 20/20 vision at last? It was perhaps the best idea he could bequeath as a Sexual Intellectual. He had to smile to himself. Look to the good, he thought. Jesus said in the *Gospel of Thomas*: "Split a stick. I will be inside."

He returned to River Street. He rang the bell. He knew what he would say. *Let's not talk. It is so useless talking and trying to understand things. Let's just sit and not speak at all. Why is the deep necessarily the sayable?* Nobody answered. Apparently Maudie and Wing—or whoever lived there now—were not at home either. He knocked hard. A few blackbirds flew off the roof, cawing *kafka*, *kafka*. He decided to go to a restaurant, the loneliest of all places on Christmas Day, where he had dinner

alone. He asked the waitress for a glass of water into which he put the flowers. When he left the restaurant, night had fallen, and it was pitch-dark. He once again walked back to Laura's flat, pressed the bell, and getting no response he sat down on the front stoop. The moon was full. It was in apogee on this cold night and in conjunction with Jupiter, and way up in the great dome that huge planet was accompanying the crisp full moon on its high, long winter course through the skies. As he looked up into the dark sky, Eyestones wondered if, as he had heard, there was the possibility of life on Europa, one of Jupiter's moons. He smiled. He said a small prayer. He asked for forgiveness. There's rosemary for remembrance, he thought. It was starting to get very cold. He had not sat on the steps of the apartment building more than a minute when he heard voices.

Suddenly down River Street from the direction of Central Square a couple slowly walked toward him. There was the vague sound of conversation. What would they take him for if he stood milling around? Eyestones crossed the street by an empty field and stood in the shadow of a small, deserted building. He listened. He thought that he recognized the thud of clumping shoes on the partially plowed street. The two figures remained shadowy and indistinct until they got to the steps. One of them was a woman. He emerged and called her name. A wraith, she turned. It was Laura Warholic. She peered through the darkness at a man in a black leather jacket and stopped in her tracks. He seemed to be holding flowers that he raised as he came to her. Who was it? She could not correlate the jacket with the face. Then suddenly she went white as paper as she raised her arms. Her upright hands twitched in horror. She was torn and bewildered as to whether she should approach that figure or speak to the angry man at whose side she stood almost paralyzed. It was Micepockets. The limping man crowhopped up the stairs and rushed inside with squirrel moves, mad darting and sudden halts. "*Wliar*!" he screeched. "*Wliar*! *Wliar*! *Wliar*!" Laura, who came running toward Eyestones was immediately brought up and screamed hysterically behind her to the open door, "*It's not him! It's not him!*" Eugene did not understand what was happening. Laura squirm-bounced in place in terrible panic for what seemed like ages, thin as a godwit, with her long beak and pin legs. The color of her eyes went white. It was then as if her face irremediably vanished.

Suddenly, cursing words that were unintelligible, Micepockets flashed through the doorway with the staring mad eyes of a swamp rat,

hobbled in a single bad thud down one step, almost fell, but then rose, and taking aim, spit, took aim again, then slam-fired, trigger-fanning the gun with an insane fury—deafening bangs like punctures, with frenetic blue sparks arcing—at the man in the black leather jacket. One for sorrow, two for mirth, three for a wedding, four for a birth. He fired three more at a figure robotically, catatonically, absorbedly walking away. Five for rich. Six for poor. Seven for a witch. The seventh was only a click. Again, a click. But the woman was too far down the street, and by then the gun ran dry.

Wild yells and shrieks came from the ragged edge of the neighborhood. In the distance a dog loudly barked in protest. Police within minutes materialized. A twisted-looking man with a nervous wet face slumped against the house into which the force of the shots had slammed him, still mindlessly squeezing the trigger to repeated empty clicks. The gun in his right hand could have been a toy. Micepockets was immediately taken into custody by three policemen. Under the harsh light of the vestibule, by the odd misspelled sign *Keep The Door Lachted*, his wife with her wild hair and bland face stood utterly dazed, a poor slattern waiting in a state of exhausted lapse. There were the sounds of children crying inside the house. Three more police cars had by now raced into River Street to block traffic. Neighborhood porch lights were snapped on everywhere. When the ambulance came, two EMTs in white uniforms, luckily one a paramedic, jumped out and yanking open the rear doors unloaded an oxygen tank and other gear where the body lay seemingly lifeless in an empty stretch of gutter. There were sprays of broken marigolds spread all around and a pair of thick hexagonal rimless glasses broken into bits. Blood loss had been great. Straddling his torso, one of the technicians who swiftly removed the man's jacket and cut off his clothing worked to be certain that the victim's airway was clear—there was just a trace of faint breathing—while the other technician desperately tried to stop the bleeding, now bright red and profuse, by fixing several tourniquets and using occlusive seals on the punctures and wounds. The victim was completely unconscious, with life-threatening chest wounds, unequal chest movement, with a failure in the wall to expand normally. There were skin avulsions. They checked the carotid pulse, which was weak, and quickly turning on the defibrillator applied the pods, attempting to determine the cardiac rhythm. They sent in three shocks, with nothing indicated. He would not stabilize. Pulse was now absent.

After sliding him on a backboard, they proceeded to the ambulance while doing chest compressions. There was a pulse again, briefly, and then there was not.

Dressing and bandages, it now seemed, were entirely futile. The paramedics, determining that their man was beginning to fail, raced to insert an endotracheal tube. In spite of their efforts, the victim was in dire peril: it was now a scoop and run. They started IV fluid and immediately called ahead to the police turret to notify the hospital that they were coming in with a GSW with multiple traumas. Within a minute they had set him onto a stretcher. The ambulance raced across the bridge from Cambridge into Boston in a rataplan of loud, screaming wails and disappeared into the night under a leaden sky with fleeting dark taupe clouds. A silence fell inside the ambulance. One technician looked up at the other and, shaking his head, gave a discouraged flick of his hand. He sat back. It was a code. No one was there at the time to identify his body by the pink birthmark on his knee.

Eugene Eyestones was gone.

In the meantime, Laura was walking aimlessly down toward the river, westswept into wet wind. Wind, she noticed to herself, had never before felt like it did when you are falling right through it. No one saw her. The wobbling figure did not even turn around to look, but then what was there to look at that she wanted to see?

LIV
Chinese Whispers

In the intervening period, time distended. Laura never attended the funeral. She heard some people say that she was responsible for Eugene Eyestones's death. Others repeated that she had been attacked. She who always claimed to be an agnostic placed herself outside all events. She stayed home and drank martinis with the music put up loud. She laughed a good deal, hiccupping like a calliope, and also cried crazy tears. Sometimes everything seemed white and rubbery and upside-down to her and not in human form and without weight. Several times she sat down to try to figure things out, but no matter how often she tried, her every thought seemed to crumble or break, and no consideration of events could justify where she was or why. Night dissolved into day. Day transmogrified into night. Terror of an utter meaninglessness had transformed into a kind of odd but voluptuous and untrustworthy euphoria, a certainty like some mad luck, a theology of hope before the sudden tribunal of her self, a whirlwind of fear and cringing alertness. Endlessness in reverse, a demon trumpeting her to the altar, caught between rage and indifference, ruined before the fatigue of being, shuddering in the decay of night.

After a few days the police came by with all sorts of questions. The story ran on the local television news. Curious neighbors gathered to murmur in the street, pointing and looking up at the windows of the notorious house, some even going up the drive that bisected it from

the next River Street dwelling. Many of the gawkers, most of them black, filled her with concern. Within the week, the landlady, widow Micepockets, crying, left a note telling Laura that her lease was being terminated and that she had to be out by January 31. Laura had heard that the young children, including the oldest one who loathed her and called out "*Scarecrow! Scarecrow!*" whenever she passed by, had been taken away to a city home. One black woman whom Laura thought a wacko several times daily stood before the porch for hours. After several reporters rang her bell, incessantly rang it, she took her small name-card off the tenant-list at the door. But still people congregated out in front of the house. And stared. And pointed. And gossiped. It was all of it Chinese whispers. Planning to move, but not quite sure, she boxed some trinkets, wrote down a list of things to sell—cheap furniture, clothes, some costume jewelry—and took it down to Wronarski's Pawn Shop, but upon reading it the fat owner only guffawed and told her it was all worth nothing. She didn't know what to do.

At first she went out only at night, walking down to the Charles embankment where she would stand quietly listening to the black water shrilling over the gravel by the shore. It was like a vacant, unreal world, these long days, these long endless hours, with anything connected to Christmas seeming futile if she tried to try to relate to it. She looked high up. *I look into an immense night with an owl-like moon and Orion with the dog at his heels,* Eyestones had once said to her. What had he ever meant by that? Another legal letter came, on top of the one she had found in her mailbox the day after Christmas. She went to the movies only once, to get away from herself. She saw a matinee of *The Night Porter,* but left in the middle of it. She had no food and needed to shop and walked through the pinching cold up to Central Square to the Food Crypt to buy some bread and some cans of refried beans, but when she brought them back to the aprtment she could not eat. She bought a bottle of liquor. Seeing strangers now, wrapped up in dark coats, she scurried across the streets through the slush to get away from them. Everything seemed deformed, irregular, interminable. She had tried to evoke Eugene's company by trying to make fried rice and cutting the chicken Chinese style: no luck. She began to feel physically ill. Her earwax, hurting her, must have built up. Whenever she picked up a knife or opened the refrigerator or answered the telephone, the act had the force of cold rage behind it. A man from the Velour Motel, a rummy she had once seen there, a sax player with an insane orange

buzz-cut who had asked her out, telephoned her several times wanting to spend the night with her, but she refused and hung up, and when one night he came by she slammed the door in his face, climbed back up the stairs, crawled into bed, and stared at the duodenal shadow on the wall. Day after day made less and less sense.

It was the threat of the lawsuits that were killing her. A $10,000 suit and a court date awaited her. What seemed lucky at first, since Laura needed an attorney, was Laura's coming across a telephone number on a card. She turned the card over. Then she remembered. It was the business card of the lawyer who had picked her up that night in Porter Square after that weird evening at the Sewing Circle: *Frass, Werdrobe, and Spraints*. She telephoned the number, he called the next day, and that very same night he came by. "Who's that?" "A rock group," said Laura. "You been to Mexico?" asked the condescending lawyer, surveying the tiny room and picking up from the mantle the postcard from Cuernavaca. He was nosy and indifferent and breezed through the room like an auctioneer. They shared a bottle of wine she bought for the occasion. "I'm sorry to call you over Christmas," she apologized. "Christmas doesn't mean shit to me," he said. "What are we talking about in cash here?" His dark curly hair, his sly deep eyes, she remembered, but the snarling sex, filled with contempt, she did not. He wore an unappealing cologne, not like the Calandre for men by Paco Rabanne that she loved. Then he was on top of her, and it was over. She felt it was a legitimate swap after taking an hour, with digressions on her bad luck, outlining the suit being filed against her.

"Whether he swindled you or you swindled him, I don't care, dig it? I cost $300 an hour."

"That's charging full."

"What the fuck do you expect?" asked the lawyer, pulling on his pants. "I do this for charity? My health? I'm in this business fifteen years. Fifteen years. I don't waive fees for anybody. You pay me, I do your dirty work." He fished for a crumb in a tooth. "I take cash only." No one's word was emptier. Laura stood up in the weak lamplight and pulled on her beige half-slip. She was all disheveled, her lipstick and eyeliner aposematically smeared on her face. She said nothing but looked like she could bite through a bar of iron. "Get some cash. Call me when you do. Or not. Bye."

It was after that that Laura never went out again. What she should do was the pressing issue. Should she move back to San Francisco? Go

to Mexico? Return to live in Wampsville? Despair means having no alternatives. She had her music, or so she thought. She could not listen to anything. In her loneliness to be committed to anything positive like celebration seemed an idiotic confirmation of futility. She telephoned that mysterious bald guy, Harry, the friend of Eyestones's typist, as she thought he might take her to dinner, but his number had been disconnected. She tried calling her mother who had now been living in Newfoundland for some time, but she proved to be unreachable, probably indifferent, and by now Laura had come to believe with Eugene Eyestones that the family into which one was born was often merely a biological grouping and that strangers in the world were half the time nicer to you than people of your own blood. Her roommates had gone for the holidays. Maudie and Wing would have been no help anyway. It was *dangerous*: she could not do or see anything, go anywhere, or read something without empty, terrible echoes trampling through her with memories and filling her with the terrible echoes or black and unholy thoughts. Contrition seemed fraudulent. The room was a horrible mess. Stacked boxes. Unwashed blankets. Empty wine bottles. Bags at rags. Piles of records. Unreturned videocassettes. Overdue library books. A spoon on the floor. She was torn between fear and anger. She piled a body of trash together, shoved it into a garbage bag, and took it downstairs only to find in the front hallway a large cardboard box with her name written on it. It was a delivery from Grace Piewheel, the smelly pituitary case in the wraparound dress from The Sewing Circle. Laura opened the box and fumbling through all the books turned a few pages. Elisabeth Craigin's *Either Is Love*. Claire Morgan's *The Price of Salt*. Mother Robber's *Peter My Wife*. Vin Packer's *Spring Fire*. Gale Wilhelm's *We Too Are Drifting*. Ann Elisabeth Weirauch's *The Scorpion*. Maria had arrived at Marseilles! It was all hardcore lesbian stuff, every last book. Laura threw the lot into a barrel there, along with the box, and ran back upstairs, unable she saw with despair to have disembodied her life in the darkness she sought but that seemed everywhere she turned to be rendering everything disastrous. Once upstairs, she snatched down the posters of Iggy Pop and the Craven Slucks and the Joel Peter Witkin reproduction. On a sudden impulse she went to a drawer and taking up a pair of scissors chopped off her hair. She stood there. The irreversible implications of what she had just done frightened her. It seemed so final. Once she thought she saw Eugene Eyestones in a dream looking down at her from the shadowy dark-

ness with aggrieved and myopic eyes, an austere phantom, a specter, a ghost, come from the eerie ramparts of God-knows-what calamity, resurrected as some kind of witness to the shame of her actions, to pity her indefinition. Where had he gotten that black leather jacket? Had he bought it for her? Where and how? Had Little Bob Merkle sold it to him? Had Jeff and Eugene ever met? Was it possible? How could that have ever happened, except in another world? Was it possible another world was happening out there at the same time that this one was? Laura pulled the shades, and when they fell she had to tape them up. She wanted to obliterate time, blot out everything. It is not that without the will to remember, there can be no will to live, but rather the pressing force of having to remember that hastens the will to die. She began gulping tranquilizers and stiff drinks now and took to sleeping with her head completely covered with a blanket, buried as if nothing was there. Every morning, seized by the coldness of the morning light she found herself awakening again to the same dull terror, having to confront the same tired consequences. It was horrible to have to witness each determined day. Several mornings she refused to get up. Sometimes she got up and peered down from the window to see if any of the groups of people went away. They had not. She gazed unreflexively down through the grey at the sentinal ash-barrels. It was day after day the same thing in the crucial loneliness, a *mourir de ne pas mourir*: dying of not dying. She felt incompatible with life.

LV
Harriet Nails up Her Theses

A few days after putting some flowers as a memorial on Eugene Eyestones's grave, Harriet Trombone, having found out earlier where Laura Warholic lived, walked all the way over to her flat on River Street with a hammer and a piece of paper in her hand and—*bang! bang! bang!*—nailed up a list for her on the panel of the front door:

1ne Kill anything white!

2wo I've heard what nasty things you've said about me, many times.

3hree Why don't you move?

4our You stole Discknickers watch.

5ive What is it with you ho's?

6ix "And I will call for a sword against her unto all my mountains, saith the Lord Jehovah!" (Ezekiel 38:21)

7even I've adopted Nook and intend to care for him. You got a problem with that?

8ight I been cryin' my eyes out. You happy?

9ine You have eyes but don't see.

10en Poor Eugene was worth fifty of you. Fifty? Hundreds!

11even I remember the kind and dear old man who brought me up once telling me, "Be what you is and not what you ain't, because if you ain't what you is, you is what you ain't." And you *is* a what you ain't!

12elve Meaning zero. Naught.

LVI
New Year's Eve

Laura was afraid of living but too terrified to die. She realized with a quaking heart that there was no alternative. She began questioning herself about what to do. In every direction lay a dead end. Less than a week had passed since Christmas day, and nothing had improved. She felt cold inside and unreal and lightheaded and scared and apprehensive. Her internal states felt completely uncovered. Hysteria made everything seem not only unendurable but pointless, a pretext for total disbelief even in the possibility of the sun coming up. It did not matter now that despair like an infrasonic note sounded in her ear at every minute. Every movement of hers seemed no more than a refrain fluttering around inconsequence. She began to wonder what would ever linger if she went away that anyone would not so much know as notice, never mind remember. It seemed utterly irrelevant to try to do anything. There could be no new beginning for her. Truths were frauds and the passions parlor tricks. Lies. The shades in the room were pulled. She had to open her eyes every morning to blinding, headachy light with the terrifying fact inside it of a murdered man, shot dead in her shadow on a dirty street.

It seemed unreal. Eugene Eyestones was gone. Gone. Forever. Always. The very mind that had to concentrate on that, she felt, seemed superficial in itself, for it could not contain the fact it had to pretend to see, to understand, to accept. Who am I, she wondered, when think-

ing that and what is the me at the moment I'm deciding to concentrate and did I respect the person asking the question anymore than she of whom it was asked now that I have involved her?

There was no one to whom she could turn. Everybody was unreachable now. She hated her father. He had rejected her all her life, from birth. Her mother, who went from man to man to man herself, had gone off to live in Newfoundland and left no forwarding address. Warholic was lying in wait to take her to court and to sue her for more money than she ever had or could hope to have. Mutrux, among the most vicious, by spreading lies had ruined her life. Discknickers, a gigolo whom she heard was seeing a waitress at Monsky's, always ridiculed her and thought only of himself anyway: the last time she saw him he was walking down Lover's Lane holding his own hand. Micepockets was in jail with blood on his hands, a murderer and a mad mental case whose precarious hold on reality had slipped. In memory she saw him with his smoking gun cursing and stumbling about in missed stairstep fashion, and she could only cover her eyes. Harvey ("No Day At The") Beech with his low-life 100 Percenting and insane $50 Threat schemes, a total phony, she hated, but he was now in jail. Jeff was a lying fuck who did not want to see her and was probably living with L'Nor anyway. She had tried, several times, to call him. Whenever he answered the telephone and heard her voice he instantly hung up. No one was there. Gayle Bagle, her enemy-friend whom she had criticized in letters, no longer spoke to her. Maudie and Wing were not friends. They never were. None of the roommates she ever had, anywhere, had ever been friends. Nothing like it. Not even close. No way.

Who did that leave? The sleazeball lawyer who came up to her room only to screw her? Bald Harry, who as a presence virtually seemed never to register? He was not home anyway. Jamm the Wesort? A *pimp*? There on top of the mantle—flaring—stood the Cuernavaca postcard. It was depressing that she had never put it away. People finally show up on their faces. Laura knew she had only lied to Eugene Eyestones about that infidelity she had charged him with so that she could have engaged in one of her own, which she in fact had done that very month he had gone to San Diego. She walked to the window and looked out. She remembered with remorse how he once spoke of her seeking novel experiences without a compensating sense of discretion. It rankled that, more a traitor to herself than anyone else, she had even once gone so far as to call Warholic one afternoon to tell him

nasty stories about Eugene, fashioning tales—lies—to hurt him. Now he was dead. Gone. Always. Forever and ever. When was the last she had seen him, she wondered. At Government Center, was it? That late afternoon when he had come over to see her at her office at that temp job and they had sat filled with tension on an urban brick wall by that sterile and drafty government square eating clam chowder that he had bought in cardboard cups? She began to cry. She dropped her head against the cold windowsill and could not stop crying, copiously weeping wet bitter tears like a sea turtle excreting salt through its eyes. She cried for several hours and dragging herself to bed fell asleep on her heartbreak fully clothed.

Daylight, voices of people outside, were pervasive but like a daydream. Seesawing fears and anger alternately rose and fell in her heart. Alternately facing a dead end with a kind of impudence and long bouts of cringing wistfulness, Laura, who found less and less reason to move, to stir, to do anything, was now floating between retrograde amnesia and despair. She began to harbor irrational fears after awhile that radios playing near her would suddenly lose their tuning and begin to fizz, that Eugene Eyestones had all along been blind and never really could see, that she could no longer feel her feet, and so forth. She tried with effort to recall details of the past, of the trip they had taken across the country. Only fragments and fleeting images came to her. An argument in Markleeville. The Freixenet Award. The day he played "The Faraway Hills" on the violin. Hadn't they together once drunk champagne by the Grand Canyon and made toasts to each other? As she sat there, days indistinct of color and indefinite of time dissolved like vapor into darkness by mid-afternoon. She began to weep and then stopped and then wept again. She could not swallow—not ingest—the hot saltiness her body made. On the day before New Year's, a thin watery sun faded early in the morning and gave way at noon to lowering darkness and blustery cold. A wild wind, tearing all day, raged against the windows and moaned in the chimney. All the walls rattled in their thinness. As usual, she resorted to bed in the afternoon and slept like a dead thing. *Delassata*. Very weary. Outworn. Spent. Something formlessly black and ugly now kicked her awake. She rose, sweating. Cruel knife-cutting winds rising, shook the roof and whistled over the chimney. It was New Year's Eve. She peered into the wristwatch she always wore: 10:43. She knew that elsewhere everyone would be celebrating. It was on this night that she heard something snap in the peace of

mind that she was sure once enfolded her. She was listening for something until her head throbbed. She heard herself screaming like a hare but nothing came out.

The room, which was disarranged, as if strewn with the preparations for departure, put a terrible idea into her head. She had a queer sick longing for oblivion. She dreaded panic, above all things. She had once been hospitalized for a chronic nonspecific anxiety that so beset her for a week that she had to be sent to doctors. The signaling terror of insistency, the hands that beat the air for passage. Anything now began to look like nothing to her darkening azoic eyes.

I can feel my ears getting pointed! she imagined. Memory is a mad squillo someone with bad eyes once told me but if he's dead maybe those memories aren't. So many many men. My cheap father. Red Cross was a mushhead with a sugarloaf-looking hat who had a cock like a beercan. That motel in California when I sat up all night and went out in the morning. Tears for fears. A scary chillyhawk, hovering motionless, ready to drop on an insect, did. Whatever we do, did. Whatever might have been done did and in a way still does. Everything did has already been done. All of the dead already did, so none of the dead did not. What is a cheap trick? Who twirled a thyyrus? Where have I gone? When will I seeee you agaaainnnn? Who, you? Yes you. Hey, Chicken Legs! My weird hips. My breastlessness. Fried eggs. Fishfinger. Roadkill. Pencils. I'm an electric ant. P. Dick. Phallus. Dick. Who cut the reality-supply construct tape? Type tape. How now, brown cow? Or was it something jumped over the lazy dog? Type that sentence. Tape from type. Forms of words. Incantations. Snowgeese migrate, deer flee, mice scatter. Have a nice summer, Bony Macaroni. Thanks for the long buggy-ride.

Was that a knock? She stood up in her panties. It was the rattling of the window, the cold sifting in, that roused her from sleep with a question mark. She thought she heard the train down by the dark shunting yards near MIT, but it was only the black wind in midnight gusts crisscrossing the high roof overhead like howling, cackling, riddling witches on brooms. Peering out the front window to the street below, she was freezing, shivering as a tremor of wind went through her. She wanted to smell again the fresh meadows down the street she had played in as a child. She wanted to lean once more against the gate at the ski lodge where her father once took the family to the mountains. She hated him. He was pigeon-kneed and cheap and when he smiled

that hateful smile it was always like his whole face was going to retract. She hated her fat cruel husband, Warholic, "Mr. 401," the porno-channel freak. She hated the fascist Discknickers. She hated Harvey Beech with his white fang and K-Records tattoo. Was it possible to begin again, ever? she wondered. Start somewhere new? Rebuild her life? Go somewhere? But where do you go when you're evicted? *I'm a trifler*, she heard. Where did that come from? Who said that? She wanted to dream again, to concern herself, if ever again she had the chance, with something—anything—of meaning. She coughed. Nothing began anymore to look like anything. She unconsciously picked up one of her journals and started to reread her words, paragraph after paragraph, so many of them angry, with one tirade against her father, written on a bus going from Albany to Boston, that was so extreme in its fury, so desperately uncontained, that she knew if that man had somehow appeared at the moment in her life she would have killed him. Page upon page upon page quoted back to her in almost criminally angry and unstrung terms everything that she hated in the world. Lists of curses! Nicknames and revengeful litanies! Rehearsals of bad scenes! Marginal notes! Upside-down additions! Revisions of her thoughts! Scratchings out! Pounding and insistent execrations!

She stood facing the dimly-lit window and looking through the glass with lifeless eyes saw her spectral reflection superimposed on the night outside, a ghost with a basin haircut. I am a fabrikoid, she thought.

Laura went and lit a candle. Shadows wigged and wagged, like dervishes in crazy revolutions. She coughed. She had developed a croup-like wheeze, a scattergun cough like stridor. She began to walk quickly, coughing, hunched, batlike, in a close circle like paved space with her hand covering her mouth. Pray. Who told her that? A nun, her legs hissing under a long garment, had. She felt exhausted. She tried to sleep but couldn't. *Say a prayer,* she heard. *What should I say?*

> There are four corners to my bed,
> Four angels round my head
> Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,
> God bless the bed that I lie on.

It didn't work. Something felt murdered in her soul. She got up. She walked to the bathroom and looked into the small mirror and when she spoke she heard only a strangely serious voice, all throat, no

nose, an octave and a half lower than hers, say, "*Where is Saint Pretzel? Where* is *Saint Pretzel*?" She sat down again with her journal. There was torture for her in seeing over and over again all the cruel, fit-hissing names that she had mercilessly listed from as far back as high school that squealed out of the venomous paragraphs in which, recording in detail the miseries they had revisited upon her, she had also coldly proscribed then for death. Strange-O, L-12, the Marabou Stork, 101 Ways to Kill Shqumb, Fishfinger, Pinocchio, Pike. She was not saucy Evelyn Nesbit and knew it. She had seen on the wall in Eyestone's rooms that photograph of the actress or whatever she was. The languorous look, the sexy hair, the insolent, provocative gaze directed right back at the viewer. She had asked him to take it down, and he refused. It was as if by reading the insults and abuse, a red hell itself had reconvened, a pandemonium of demonic imprecations all addressed to her. She needed her revenge but at the same time had to face her crackpated need repeatedly to settle scores with everyone from her mother to her father to Warholic to all those female weasels at school to Mutrux to crazy Micepockets and his horrible brats. Now Eugene was dead. Dead in the shroud of borrowed clothes. Dead like broken shutters. Dead like when in the dreary autumn glamour of Corot, light finally fades away. Dead like cracked crockery. Dead and cold like her life, her repeated nonexistence flats like rooms in mausoleums. Dead like a procryptic insect, hiding and still. Dead like her insignificance. Dead in unanticipated unreason. Dead as a dog in a dirty ditch. Dead not from disease but disaster. Recriminations howled at her. Was that the train from the shunting yards at MIT? It wasn't. It wasn't the trains. Was it in her mind? Her memory? She remembered those words. She had memorized that. *It is life near the bone. Where it is sweetest.* Thoreau. Lies. *You are defended from being a trifler.* She bit her lip white. *I'm a trifler.* She bit back her tears forming in her soul. Perhaps if she pressed her hands against her eyes she would blot out the picture; perhaps if she thrust her fingers in her ears she would muffle the sound.

Laura stared at the flame of the candle and into its pale yellow wisps with the inflicted scarlet tinge in the upper forks and side-wings of bluish white. There is no red in a flame, she thought. *I am red.* She recalled living in Astoria and being depressed there and drinking half a bottle of vodka a day, along with unreckonable amounts of wine and codeine. She slept with men and got high on drugs and one night with terror watched little mice running under her eyes. All her drinking had

begun with "heel taps," she reflected, sipping the smiles of the drinks of her father's visiting friends after they had left. She faddled her blunt hair with her fingers. She looked at her fingers. Her fingers were raw and rough like chewtick.

Alone, she sat covered by the darkness like a thing pursued. It seemed like a pact in that godforsaken room that she and darkness had made with themselves. It was so cold. It was so dark. Laura hated to do so but counterphobically willing herself to recall the past turned to the last entries she had made in her journal and in a sudden spate of fury viciously crossed out Jeff's hateful name everywhere she saw it, scoring the words out in intemperate slashes as she held the pen-tip like a killer a sharp dirk. She flashed through the pages, as all the faces of the past emerged like armies of ballooning ghosts to revile her with the endless rosary of her defeats and failures from the very moment she was born. Defeat had become her underworld, the dark her light, a geography of depths. *No man loses ever on a lower level by magnanimity on a higher.* What is the higher if you were never there to know it? To feel it? To see it? Isn't to lose on a lower level the very meaning of defeat? She saw with a raw glare of misery that she had quarreled with just about every friend and acquaintance she had ever had. She slowly turned over the pages. Years of disappointment crowded into the impatient, critical, petulant summaries she read in her very own handwriting. Aloneness. A necessity of the soul. Lies. Was it necessary? *Superfluities only*. Lies. *Money is not required.* Lies. Turning the pages of the journal revealed depths of pain. Her insistent words reminded her of everything she was not. Each ink-stained page was a sounding board for what, documenting her rejection and refusal, paradoxically echoed back as a history of her own discontent and vituperation. An autobiography emerged. It was nothing but a thinly disguised portrait of herself. She remained captive in a closet of her own experiences. The tint of artifice revealed her, feeding on the lack of perfect correspondence between the actress and the acted part, a collaboration that never coincided. What was that line in that Nick Drake song? In spontaneous contempt for goodness and simplicity, she undervalued any potential belief, inspired by even the least self-respect. A further horror was that this night of all nights pitilessly constituted the very lengths to which summary would go to indict. It was at the end. It was an end. It was the end itself. It became almost more than she could take. Finding the pen in her fingers, she automatically began to write. It seemed normal and ordinary to be

writing the words that she was writing. For no reason that she could discern, the words that she wrote began to comprise a farewell. Odd. After writing only a few words, she paused with the pen in midair. She could feel the back of the heat of her mood with her mind.

What that was important should she continue to add to a journal already proving her a fool? Casting her as a loser? Mocking her? And what did it matter? In the end your questions are not around, you simply don't remember them. They say happiness is the folly of fools. Pity poor me, one of the fools. Music. Somewhere far off she heard sounds of celebration. Noises. Horns. The sounds were probably coming from the Velour Motel, decorated with long streamers of rustling crêpe-paper, where drunks and prostitutes stumbling over each other went from room to room. She closed her eyes. She was acting by rote. Everything began to race, but with a speed as if it were happening to her. As speed picked up, her eyes moved less and less. A demon had slipped into her ear and crouched, waiting. She had about her the aura of absolute decision. Her eyes need not sweep the scene, because the scene swept her eyes. She was being carried somewhere in the red night of darkness. Laura spotted in a corner the green typewriter that Eugene Eyestones had given her. Fuddy-duddy machine. Dumb machine. It was what he used to write on when he wrote about her. She lifted it and set it on the table. Hermes. Wasn't he the god of something or other?

She found a piece of paper and typed a zero. Then a whole row of zeros: 0000000. Naught. Nothing. Nada. Harriet Trombone was correct. Cipherville is oblivion. The comfort not to be. She heard something inside her head she did not want to hear. It was Eugene's voice talking to her. She then began to type meaningless words. *Clack, clackkk.* She wanted to type and send threatening letters to Discknickers, Warholic, Jeff. *Clack.* But why? What in her life was going to change? *Clack.* She wanted to threaten her father. *Clack.* It was a dead end. There was no one to turn to of all the people she knew. Check out the Wilpons yet? No, not yet. There was no one to turn to. Nobody. Not one body. Not a single body. All those cold rising faces like white balloons emerging through the air. Rosary of defeats. Fishfinger. Mudnun, they called her in high school. The Rake. Screwels. A fabrikoid. She was a fabrikoid. Was that another knock? Who's there? Who is it, Constance Quesnet—or Quonstance Cesnet? Again she heard something in her head she did not want to hear. *Clack. Clack.* Nothing is ours that an-

other may deprive us of. It was as if, coming alert, she were literally watching herself happen, but happen in a new way, happen differently, defining her mind in the process of thinking about it, finding a storm in her mind by way of the track of the storm. Increasingly she was not there anymore but someone else, like an eerie photograph taken by infra-red light, imposing but transparent and unreal. A movie began flickering. They say happiness is a thing you can't see. A thing you can't touch.

Clack. Clack. Clack. Nothing. She heard this time what she allowed herself, finally, to listen to. *You could hang Virginia hams on it.* All our humiliations come from what we ignore. What you ignore is liable to kill you. Who was it told the person who heard that? *No one knows the fruit tree except the rain and the air, but everyone will stand and stare when it's gone!* That's what Nick Drake sang. No one knows the fruit tree.

Positioning herself to anticipate the familiar position of typing a letter, Laura was incomprehensibly defeated in intention as if fate, with another plan, had without her volition locked her in a tight suffocating embrace. Her skin was goat-yellow. She felt light-headed and vague. Looking down from above, out of her self, she glimpsed herself as fraudulent suddenly, and her nostrils expanded by some ghost within. She typed: "Asccidentally in the morning and after that every evening and accidentally every evening *clack clack* and after that every morning and after that accidentally every morning and after that accidentally and after that every morning. . . ." She stopped, put up no resistance, closed her eyes. Letting herself go, reeling, submitting to a foul hint, reaching out with the expectant awkwardness of a puppet, with both hands she lifted off the typewriter-cover and took out the ribbon. There were no tears. She was now too cold to feel tears. Her skinny distempered frame, aging with a slender fillet of grey across the forepart of her head, seemed to tighten. She wheezed. Her nose seemed to grow longer with predatory awareness.

No shadow, any more than a glacier, can pass over a region without tampering with its contours. And she knew she had lived in the darkness for too long now, peering ineffectually out of a cave, eating the ashes of sorrow. It was all useless. She wanted by oblivion to widen into infinite space and end her suffocation, to disappear forever into a beyond of transfinite nothingness.

Aloneness was nearer God. Laura's thoughts raced. Who told her that aloneness was nearer God? Who was God? I don't even know

where you are, never mind who, your majesty. Where did she hear that? Who told her that and when? She wanted oblivion, then she wouldn't care. Wind outside rose and rattled the windows. She heard it again. *You could hang Virginia hams on it.* Unspooling the ribbon, she followed her habit of leaning forward when speaking, her torso canted as though feeling for a place to land. She blew out the candle. Her ink-black fingers swiftly and efficiently slid down the ribbon to a suitable length at each stained hand, wrapping it for strong fist-holds. She grew ice-cold, and Laura actually began farting from fright. But it was what the truth expected of her in her fruitlessness.

She snapped the ribbon once. It was tight.

Laura then wound the ribbon around her neck three times, pulling, savagely pulling, cursing as she yanked, her eyes squinting as if against sun and snow, trying to reach the inner bone of her neck. Her spine never complained as if evil triggered a permanency in what should take place. As cunning is the natural opponent of strength, she had to fight herself fiercely to die, like two people madly racing at each other. A simple quack with foam sounded a cry of unexpected compassion. She looked grey as cindercrete, her skin the misty *truite de bleu* color of a poached fish, bent over at 38 degrees, the first avalanche pitch. Her body lay as she fell on its right side, nose to the baseboard, left shoulder leaning against the wall, right leg up on a table intersecting a loose telephone cord that snaked insidiously between her long, prehensile toes. With open eyes, a look less of bewilderment than utter disgust in that final, futile tableau remained on her face, smeared, stained, the way our tears actually mourn for us.

We are diminished only by our hopes, not when we are led to hope what no hope in this world lets us glimpse, but when we insist futilely that what we dream, what within us we wish in the face of the dark, come true. Our wishes are but our temptations. We are spectators of our own lives.

We begin to live bravely perhaps when we are challenged to act against the truth. When we seek to love and to mate and so dream with a hope of coming to count even if in the face of everything that we seek proves to disappear, we take a terrible risk. It takes place in the blazing wildfire of the heart where, swept into the terrible if incandescent red zone of equatorial passion where a person has two shadows, we are willing to lose ourselves in another as we exchange fates with one whom we love but on whom our heart is nevertheless impaled.

Why does that struggle make us a captive? Where is the peace we are due for the penance we give? The sanctuary? There is no escape while the mind is attentive to the heart's urges, where fancies are sought and dreams are begot. How sad it is that we must suffer in the very place where we love. Vision constantly calls to us like a seditious angel with what could be. The desire is that the realm exists around the corner of our minds where reality is an intruder and dreams alone, the bad along with the good, remain both a retreat and refuge we use to authenticate ourselves. It is an illusion. There is no such asylum. The fatal and incapacitating truth is that our dreams are often only a matter of the heart. Paradoxically, of all possibilities, a dream is the single experience that none of us can share. Dreams offer no recourse. Nor in the end can they be found to renew or redeem us. Dreams, by definition, do not come true.

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